

LIFE OF HELL

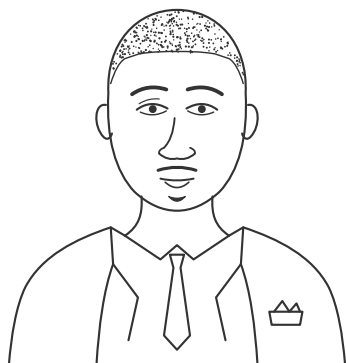


BY SAVVY GUY

LIFE OF HELL

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Conversations About Life, Truth and Survival



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Life of Hell: Conversations About Life, Truth and Survival

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*For my father, who told me the truth when it would have been easier
to lie.*

*For my grandparents, who raised me, fed me, and got me out the
house.*

*And in memory of Baraka, who was honest with me when the world
wasn't.*



FOREWORD



“Just keep it a hundred. On this channel we keep it all the way a hundred.”

I never planned on writing a book. I planned on talking. I sat down in front of a camera, said “what’s going on, guys,” and told the truth about my life as I saw it. Then I did it again the next night, and the night after that.

When I make these Life of Hell conversations, I’m not just talking out of my behind. These are seeds that was implanted in me when I was a kid, by my father, by my grandparents, and by everything life put me through after that. Some of you heard them and called me negative. Some of you heard them and wrote to me saying, “Man, I thought it was just me.” This book is for the second group.

I was young and dumb for a long time. People told me to take this seriously and I played around. My father always told me that doing the same thing and expecting a different result is insanity. So this is me doing something different. Without commitment you’ll never start. Without consistency you’ll never finish. And that’s what we’re doing here.

I’m not going to tell you what you want to hear. I’m going to tell you what I’ve seen. Take what’s real for you and leave the rest.

S A V V Y G U Y





INTRODUCTION

ANOTHER LIFE OF HELL CONVERSATION



*“The sermons that we preach here on Life of Hell
Conversations, these are the sermons that the pastor needs to
be preaching in the church.”*

If you have ever watched one of my videos, you know how they start. I tell you it's your host, Savvy Guy, and that we're about to have another Life of Hell conversation. Then I talk. Just a man in his mid-thirties saying out loud what he has figured out about life.

I have had well over a thousand of those conversations now. They cover everything: the people who raised me, the church I grew up in, the friends who turned out not to be friends, money, work, women, getting older, and the way the world really operates compared to the way we were told it operates. This book puts them in one place.

I called the channel Life of Hell for a reason, and I'm not going to pretend otherwise on the first page of a book. Life has been hard for me, and it has been hard for a lot of the guys who watch. Not hard the way

motivational speakers mean it, where the struggle is one chapter before the victory. Hard in the way where you do everything you were told to do and the victory never shows up. How I found that out is where Chapter 1 begins.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS

This is not a self-help book. I don't have a program, I don't have a morning routine that will change your life, and I don't believe your thoughts create your reality. I believe your reality creates your thoughts. Your mindset is an archive of everything that has happened to you, and you can't talk yourself out of an archive.

What I have instead is observation. Thirty-some years of watching how people actually behave, as opposed to how they say they behave. I'm passing it on in plain language, because the people who lied to me did it with pretty words and the people who told me the truth did it bluntly. Some of it will sound like a sermon. Just not the kind I heard on Sunday mornings.

HOW TO READ IT

Each chapter is built from the conversations on one subject. They were recorded over years, so you will see me come at the same idea from different angles, the way you would if you sat with a man long enough. I've tightened it up, but I kept the way I talk. If a sentence reads like I'm repeating myself, it's because I am. Some things need to be said three times before they stick.

The book moves roughly in the order life does, in seven parts. Part One is a single chapter, Accept Reality, because nothing else in here makes sense until you look at the world as it is. Part Two goes back to where it all started: the formative years, then my parents, then the rest of

the family. Part Three is about the people you choose, your friends, and what happens when you choose to be by yourself. Part Four is money, and it gets a part of its own because so much of everything else depends on it.

Part Five is attraction and love: first knowing where you stand, then what love actually costs. That's where I lost the most time and learned the most. Part Six is about what you're told to believe and how you hold on to it: the church I left, the mind and what it keeps, and how to live in this society without becoming what it wants you to be.

Part Seven is the part most people skip, which is how you actually get through the days once you know all of this. It starts with turning your pain into champagne. Then it goes into getting older, what the headlines can teach you, and the hell meter, my way of measuring how much hell you're carrying and bringing it down. It ends with the last conversation in the book, on the meaning of existence. After that comes a short closing.

Every chapter ends with a short list I call *What I'd Tell You*. That's the part to write down. At the back of the book, the Field Guide puts every one of those lists in one place, so if you only keep one part of this book, keep that. And if some of the words I use are new to you, the glossary after it tells you what I mean by them.

WHO I AM

I'm a Black man from the suburbs outside Atlanta. My grandparents mostly raised me, in a big church, with my father's hard truths in one ear and, in the other, a mother who meant well and told me things that weren't true. I have worked regular jobs my whole life: grocery stores, restaurant kitchens, a mailroom over the holidays. Right now I cook in a hotel kitchen, and I'm finishing the automotive program I enrolled in at thirty-five. I like fragrances, well-cut suits, a glass of champagne, and dancing when the day has been bad. I have never been the guy who gets

picked, and I stopped pretending that didn't matter somewhere in my late twenties.

None of that makes me an authority. It makes me a witness. Everything in here is what I saw from where I was standing. Don't let anybody, me included, talk you out of what you know to be true about your own life.

Alright. Let's have another Life of Hell conversation.

PART ONE



THE WORLD AS IT IS

*“You got to live in reality. Look at what’s
in front of you.”*



MY FATHER



CHAPTER ONE

ACCEPT REALITY



“The truth is only negative because a person don’t want to hear it.”

My father told me at fourteen that girls were not going to want me, and it saved me. But his was only one voice in my ear, and for most of my life it was outnumbered.

I was raised in church. My grandparents mostly raised me, and they did it with good intentions. I grew up under Creflo Dollar at World Changers, Sunday after Sunday, and that’s what one side of my family was pouring into me. The other side, my father, was telling me to live in reality and look at what’s in front of me.

That argument never really ended. Not long ago my mother texted me that everybody goes through tribulations, and that “only love and truth are the keys to a harmonious life.” She means it with her whole heart. I love her. But I couldn’t sign off on it, because I’ve seen too much. Everybody is not catching hell on top of hell, and she can’t convince me that we all suffer the same.

I believed the church side all the way into my twenties. Then I started paying attention to who was actually winning, and who was getting walked on, and I had to pick a side. This whole book comes out of that choice. Before we can talk about women, money, family, friends, or anything else, we have to talk about accepting life the way it actually is. Not the way the preacher says it is. Not the way the motivational speaker says it is. The way it is.

WHEN DID THE TRUTH BECOME NEGATIVE?

People have been calling me negative since I started talking. Some of them call me slow. Some call me a buzzkill, a Debbie Downer, a pessimist. And I always ask them the same question: when did the truth become negative?

Think about who does not get called negative. The gangbanger doesn't get called negative. The con artist, the liar, the cheater, the gossip, none of them get called negative. But a man gets on camera and says his life has been hard and here's why, and all of a sudden he's the problem. That's not negativity. That's just a person talking about his life and being real about his circumstances. If I'm negative for telling the truth, if I'm negative for keeping it real, then I'll just be the enemy.

Here's what I've figured out about why people react that way. People think the truth is negative and people think lies are positive. People like things that make them feel good. It's what you call wishful thinking, because you want to deny reality. Lies cater to your emotions. The truth is unsettling, it bruises the ego, and most people would rather be comfortable than correct.

*If I'm negative for telling the truth, if I'm negative
for keeping it real, then I'll just be the enemy.*

I've also noticed something about the people who get defensive with me. Anytime somebody gets an attitude with something you're saying, that's how you know you struck a nerve. They don't argue with you because you're wrong. They argue with you because deep down they know you're right and it hurts. My own mother gets an attitude with me when I tell her the truth in our discussions, and I've told her to her face: I'm not negative, you just don't want to hear it.

Church is where a lot of this starts, at least for people raised like me. Church fills your head with fairy tales and false hope. Trouble don't last always, God has a special plan for everybody, it's what's on the inside that counts. My stepfather used to play that gospel song, "Trouble Don't Last Always," in the house. I'm here to tell you that sometimes trouble lasts until the day you die. At some point you have to wake up to cold hard facts, and when you do, the people still asleep are going to call you negative for it.

My father put it the simplest way. Not looking at things for what they are, that's the real negativity. I think my father was too real for this world. There are some people who are just too honest, and he is one of them. But I'd rather have been warned by a man who was too honest than raised on pretty lies. The truth is like bitter cough syrup. You don't want to take it, but the truth is always the better medication.

THE LUCK OF THE DRAW

My father has a saying, and I've probably repeated it in a hundred of these conversations: life is the luck of the draw. Some people got it good, some people got it hard, and most of what decides which one you get was settled before you came out of your mama.

Think about what actually determines how easy your life will be. The family you were born into. Your IQ. The way your face looks. Your ethnicity. Where you were born, and when. You didn't pick any of it.

Nobody consented to being born. We just came out and we're here, holding whatever cards were handed to us.

Some people were dealt a fair deck. Some people were dealt an unfair deck. That's the whole explanation for most of what you see in this world. In my own case, part of my hand was being born a brother who didn't come from the hood, raised in collared shirts by a father who listened to country music and heavy metal. In my experience that put me out of step with the culture I was born into and with the women in it, and I caught hell for it that another man in another skin would not have caught.

Some days I catch myself wondering why I couldn't have been born into a rich family. I could be on Fifth Avenue right now, buying a cashmere shirt at Zegna. I wasn't. That was the draw, and no amount of wishing reshuffles the deck.

So let me say it plainly to every man who feels like life did him wrong: some of us were cheated in life, and it wasn't through any fault of our own. If that's how you see your life, don't let anyone tell you that you're wrong about your perception. A lot of people know they were cheated and will never admit it, because it takes a real person to be that honest and transparent with himself. And what's so brutal about it is that you only get one life to live. There's no second round. Some people are going to live a crappy life until the day they die, and knowing that ahead of time is devastating.

Society doesn't want you to believe in the cards. Society wants you to believe in hard work. Pull your bootstraps up, you just didn't want it bad enough. I believe in working. I've always worked. I've prepped food in kitchens, I've gone to class, and now I cook for a living while I finish an automotive program. I was never lazy a day in my life. But hard work alone will not grant success. Hard work without favor is a recipe for disaster. You need the odds in your favor, something working for you that you didn't earn, and somebody willing to give you a chance.

Look at Jeremy Meeks. His 2014 mugshot went viral, a modeling agency signed him while he was still in prison, and when he walked out he had a career waiting for him. He had a criminal record, and none of it mattered because of his face. He ended up in a relationship with a billionaire's daughter and had a son with her. Now compare that to a man who did everything right and is still working seven days a week, one step away from being under the bridge. Which one worked harder? The question answers itself.

And the people at the top will never tell you the whole story. My father told me a long time ago that luck is a big factor in big success, and that a lot of these people couldn't do it again if they tried. They had family money, or the right face, or a talent they were born with, or a connection with someone powerful. They leave that part out when they get on stage and tell you about the grind. If hard work alone equaled success, don't you think everybody would be rich? There are plenty of ambitious people out here, and most of them are still broke.

There's an old song my father played for me when I was young, "Nothing from Nothing," and the lesson in it is the lesson of this whole world. You have to have something to get something. If you don't look good and you don't have much of nothing, then you can't expect anything. Zero from zero is zero. Basic math. You cannot walk into a store and get a bottle of Baccarat Rouge that costs close to a thousand dollars for nothing, and you cannot walk into this life and get companionship, respect and a good position for nothing either. Everything comes with a price, and people are not paying it with their personality. They are paying it with their looks and their resources.

EVERYBODY CAN'T MAKE THE TEAM

Growing up, kids are told they can be anything they want to be. My father told me something different. "You can only become what you're

capable of becoming,” he said. At the time it sounded harsh. Now I think it’s one of the realest things anybody ever said to me.

When I was a kid I used to act out movies word for word, like I was the one starring in them, and I dreamed about being an actor. People will tell you it’s never too late, and maybe it isn’t, but you’d need the skill. The great actors went to school, sure, and they still needed the raw talent before school could do anything with them. Same with singing. I love R&B and I like to sing, and I know I don’t have the skill to compete with Usher or Bruno Mars for a living. I wish I had any talent like that. I don’t, and pretending otherwise would just be one more lie.

Everybody can’t be a brain surgeon. Everybody can’t play in the NBA. Not everybody has the IQ for certain careers, and not everybody has the face for certain lives. That doesn’t make you less than anybody else. It means you’re not cut out for it, and the honest thing is to say so, choose another path, and stop beating yourself up for not reaching something you were never equipped to reach.

Greatness doesn’t exist in everybody. The way I see it, Michael Jordan had an it factor that no coach could have trained into me or you. Usher sings the way he sings because he was born with that voice. I’m a firm believer that winners are born, not created. You can work hard to perfect what you already have, but you cannot cultivate an ability that was never there. You can go to football practice every day and learn every fundamental of the game, and if you aren’t athletic, you still won’t make the roster. Working hard without talent is going to be a recipe for disappointment.

The same thing applies in the areas of life nobody wants to be honest about. Companionship is just like making the football team. Everybody can’t make the team, and only the best players get selected. Some men get picked from day one. Some men got cut in middle school and never got called back. In high school a girl tried to hook me up with a girl she figured was at my level. I won’t say a word about that young lady, but I’ll tell you what it told me: I was already playing from a deficit, and

everybody could see it but me. People will tell you that's your mindset or your game. In my experience, it's genetics, and it was decided long before you ever opened your mouth.

I think about it like the video games I played as a kid. *Mortal Kombat* let you pick the difficulty: very easy, easy, hard, very hard. Life does the same thing, except you don't get to pick. The day you were born, somebody set your difficulty level, and some people have been playing on very hard their whole life while other people breeze through on easy and tell you to try harder. We are not all playing the same game. We never were.

Some people were born chosen and some people were born unchosen. Some were meant to conquer and some to be conquered. Everybody wants to be number one, but like Nelly said, two is not a winner and three nobody remembers. I represent for the unchosen. If you're reading this and most of what I'm saying sounds like your life, you're probably one of them. I'm not saying that to hurt you. I'm saying it because nobody else is going to.

GOOD PRINCIPLES IN AN EVIL WORLD

My grandparents taught me to be a good person. Be meek, be humble, be kind, do right by people, pray. "Just be good, son, and everything will work out." I heard some version of that my whole childhood. They probably taught me that to keep me out of trouble and out of the penal system, and I give them credit for everything they did for me, especially helping me in school. But the information was wrong for this world.

My father was the one voice saying different. He told me straight out that it's better to be an evil person than a good one, because people read kindness as weakness. I didn't want to hear that as a boy. Not long ago he asked me, "Son, are you going to let somebody devour you like they did Jesus?" He has never stopped trying to get me to see the wolves.

Here's what I saw when I actually looked. In middle school and high school, the people with the most clout and the most respect were often the worst people in the building. Now I'm a grown man and I see the same thing on a bigger scale. I've been around cutthroat people who are not good people, and they're blessed anyway. One day an attractive woman in her forties sat and told me all about her rocky marriage and the husband who cheats on her, and she was still talking about taking him back. Meanwhile there are men out here who would be faithful until the day they die and can't even get a date. People with the worst character get praised, respected and chosen. The ones trying to do right get walked over and ridiculed.

My grandmother told me when I was a kid that there are more bad people in the world than good. She was right about that part, and I wish I had put it together with the rest of what she taught me. In my younger days I tried to be meek and humble and extend myself to everybody, because I thought it mattered. People assumed I was a pushover, and they treated me like one.

So here's what I had to accept. This world rewards looks, money and status. I call them the three pillars, because those are the things people actually judge you by. Society rewards vanity. It does not reward morality, it does not reward good deeds, and it does not reward believing in Jesus. We were so frustrated because we were applying good principles to an evil world. The principles weren't bad. They just don't fit the place we live.

We were so frustrated because we were applying good principles to an evil world.

You've heard the saying that your attitude determines your altitude. I used to believe it. I was delusional. Your looks, your status and your money determine your altitude. There are plenty of nasty, low-vibration

people in first class right now toasting with champagne, and plenty of people with beautiful attitudes being treated like peasants at the grocery store. If people don't like your face, they'll decide you have a bad attitude anyway. Your face is the bad attitude.

Once I understood that the world is this way, it told me something important: it's not me that's the problem. I stopped going out of my way to be nice to everybody. I'm still cordial. I don't bother anybody. But I don't extend myself the way I used to, and I'd tell any young man the same thing. Don't be a jerk, but don't be a pushover either. Be discerning. Plenty of people out here are wolves in sheep's clothing, and being nice to the wrong person can get you used, abused, or worse.

YOUR REALITY CREATES YOUR MENTAL

The most popular lie in the motivational world is change your mindset, change your life. My pastor used to preach it from the pulpit, and dating coaches still sell it. I'll go deeper into the mind later in this book, but here's the short version: your reality creates your mental. A positive mindset comes from having a good life. A fighter who gets knocked down every time he steps into the ring is not going to strut, and nobody with sense would expect him to.

A viewer once sent me a hypothesis called depressive realism, the sadder but wiser idea. The research suggested that mildly depressed people see their lack of control over life more accurately than optimistic people do. I read it and agreed with every word. The depressive mindset is more real, and the optimistic mindset is more delusional. Illusions and lies feed the ego. They feel good. The truth is too brutal to digest, so most people spit it out and call it negativity.

This is also why I don't have certain conversations with certain people anymore. People who are used to winning cannot relate to people who have known nothing but misfortune. Their advice is based on their reality, and their reality looks nothing like mine. Never talk to a winner

about losing. It takes somebody who's losing to understand the life of somebody who's losing. When you tell someone with a good life that the world is hard, they hear negativity. When you tell someone who's been through it, they hear their own story.

People have asked me my whole life why nothing seems to bother me, why I never get mad. The honest answer is that I'm numb to the madness. When you've been losing since your adolescent days, you become immune to losing, the same way a person living next to a pigsty stops smelling it. You become immune to disappointment, because that's all you know. Don't mistake that for peace, and don't mistake it for weakness. It's just what a lifetime of disappointment does to a man.

LOOK AT WHAT IS

My father kept telling me the same thing in different words. "You got to live in reality. Look at what's in front of you." The spirit world has nothing to do with planet Earth, he'd say. Look at what is.

The simplest way to find out the truth about your life is to look at your life. Not at what you hope, not at what the preacher promised, not at what the guy on the internet says you could become. Look at the pattern. The way people have treated you, the things you've been through, how things have unfolded year after year, that's the proof. If you can list bad experiences from grade school all the way up to today, and the people around you can list nothing but good ones, you don't need anybody to explain your position to you. Your life is telling you everything you need to know.

Patterns don't lie. If things haven't been good, what makes you think they're about to get good? When I was nineteen a guy told me it was only going to get worse with age, and I dismissed him as negative. He was right. Years later a buddy told me some lives just stay dark, and I didn't want to hear that either.

I used to think my problems with women were about not being a thug, or about race. Then I noticed men of every race in the same position, and I noticed the giggling started before I ever said a word. It was my appearance. I didn't understand that until I was twenty-seven, when a buddy finally opened my eyes, and I wish somebody had drawn me the whole picture back in the eighth grade. A barber told me when I was a teenager that I looked like somebody who gets picked on. He wasn't being cruel. He was reading the same thing everybody else was reading, and I was the last one to see it.

Being honest with yourself is harder than being honest with other people, and we'll get deeper into that when we talk about the mind. Saying out loud that your life has been bad is not weakness. It takes a lot of strength and willpower to be brutally honest about yourself. The people lying about their lives, telling everybody things are great when they know they've been through hell, those are the ones who should worry you.

Some people have told themselves the same story for so long that they believe it. I watch people do this and I understand why. Lying to yourself keeps you afloat. But it doesn't change the reality of anything. While you're denying reality, reality is staring you dead in the face, and in the end you're the fool.

I was ignorant for years. I thought character mattered, I thought believing in God mattered, I thought being nice counted for something. I forgive myself for that, because nobody had shown me any different yet. What I won't do is stay that way after life has shown me the truth over and over. Time will tell you everything you need to know, if you're willing to look.

POP SOME CHAMPAGNE

Here's the part people don't expect from me. Accepting all of this is what gave me peace.

When I believed the world was fair, I was angry all the time. I did everything right and got nothing for it, and I couldn't understand why. Once I understood that the world doesn't reward being good, that life is the luck of the draw, and that I was never going to be the guy who gets picked, the frustration came off my heart. It took the hostility out of me. I'm not fighting a reality I can't change anymore, and that's the whole difference.

It also helps to know you're not alone. Most people you see out in public are wearing a poker face. A lot of people smiling and laughing in the mall go home and cry. I believe most people are unhappy and suppress it with alcohol, their phones, or whatever they can find, and I don't judge them for it anymore. Most people are grinding from sunup to sundown, dealing with bills and condescending managers, and they'll never tell you. I'm grateful I get one day off a week, because I've talked to people who work all seven. Once you understand that life is not good for most people, it gives you a sense of comfort. That's why I can dance and smile on camera. I know times are hard for everybody, not just me.

So here's what I actually do with the hand I was dealt. I focus on what I can control. I can't control my sex appeal or whether a woman ever wants me. I can control learning a trade, getting my finances together, taking care of my health, and doing things I enjoy.

Get yourself something nice every now and then. Eat some sushi. Take a vacation when you can. Buy the cologne you've been wanting. You need something along the way to keep you motivated. Most of us are going to live mediocre lives, and there's nothing wrong with a mediocre life as long as you get a little goodness in it.

Don't sit around harboring over the things you can't change. I know that's easier said than done, and I'm not pretending otherwise. But focusing on what's out of your control only brings more sadness and misery on top of what's already there. Try not to beat yourself up too bad over aspects of life that were decided before you were born. If somebody

has a problem with the way you look, they need to take that up with the one who made you.

And keep walking the straight and narrow anyway. Not because there's a reward at the end, because there isn't one. Walk it because at least you'll stay out of trouble, and staying out of trouble is the only reward most of us are going to get. A man who was dealt bad cards and still kept his hands clean has something, even if the world never gives him credit for it.

I'll leave you with the thing I say at the end of a lot of these conversations. Some people are going to suffer to the day they die, and that's not being pessimistic, that's just being real. If you're one of the people who got the short hand, you didn't ask for it and it's not your fault. Charge it to the game. If you one of them people that's cursed, pop some champagne, because we all in this together.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ Life is not what you make it; it's the cards you were dealt, and most of that hand was settled before you were born.
- ☛ If telling the truth makes you the enemy, then be the enemy.
- ☛ Talent is born, not built, so work with what you have instead of what you wish you had.
- ☛ Work hard anyway, but stop believing effort alone decides who wins.
- ☛ Never go to a winner for advice about losing.
- ☛ Your own track record, from grade school to today, is the most honest witness you will ever have.
- ☛ Accepting the hand you got is what takes the hostility off your heart.
- ☛ Walk the straight and narrow anyway, not for a prize, but because staying out of trouble is a win.
- ☛ If you got the short hand, it's not your fault, and you're not the only one holding it.

PART TWO



WHERE YOU COME FROM

*“Life is a timed art. You a kid now, you’ll
be grown tomorrow.”*



MY FATHER



CHAPTER TWO

THE FORMATIVE YEARS



“Your adolescent days let you know how your adult life is going to be.”

Elementary school was the best time of my life. I am not exaggerating. My grandmother sent me to summer camp every year, and one summer the camp was at the church I grew up in. Fridays at camp meant water-gun fights, and I had the expensive water gun my folks bought me, so I took Fridays seriously. We took summer trips with my grandparents to Savannah and Tybee Island. I was in my uncle’s wedding out in Phoenix, running around the reception with the other kids without a care in the world. The only things I had to worry about were school, playing outside and riding bikes. When you’re a kid you live in a fantasy world, and for that little window of time, that’s exactly how it should be.

Then middle school came, puberty hit, and I started liking girls. Everything changed. I have said it a hundred different ways on camera and I’ll say it again here, because it is the truest thing I know about my own life. My life went downhill as soon as I started liking females. Hell didn’t start breaking out in most people’s lives until they started liking

females. That's when the cliques form. That's when you find out where you stand. That's when you get your label.

I didn't understand it at the time. Nobody told me. I thought middle school and high school were something you got through, like a bad stretch of weather, and that real life started afterward. What took me until my thirties to see is that those years were not the warm-up. They were the game. Those adolescent years let you know your market value, and the verdict that gets handed down at thirteen, fourteen, fifteen is the one you carry out the door.

That's what this chapter is about. What those years did to me, what I tried to do about it, what I wish somebody had told me, and what I'd tell a young man who's in the middle of it right now.

THE WORLD IS A BIG HIGH SCHOOL

Here is the thing nobody tells you when you're a teenager: the people around you are not going to change. The mindset of people never changes. It's just that you grow up and become an adult. The same cliques, the same bullying, the same ridiculing, the same narcissism, it all keeps going. The only difference is that now everybody has a job and a car payment. I used to hear older folks say the world is a big high school, and I thought it was just something people said. Now I see what they mean, because it is.

When I was a teenager I told myself it would get better with age. If the girls weren't checking for me at fifteen, surely they would at twenty-five. If I was on the outside of every circle in high school, surely adults would be more open-minded. I held on to that for years. By thirty-four I looked around, and it was the opposite. The same judgmental attitude people had in those younger days, they still have as adults. It actually gets worse, because as a grown man more is expected of you.

The reason is simple and cold. Your appearance is your credentials, and unfortunately, if people don't like the way you look, your social

standing is not going to be good. In my school the popular kids were the athletes and the cheerleaders, the ones with the looks. I remember one popular kid on the football team who never had to work at a conversation in his life. He was outgoing because the world was inviting to him. Me, I could talk to pretty much anybody and I was cordial with everybody, and I still felt like I had bad social skills. The kids who got negative reinforcement from day one grew up into anxious, insecure adults. People love to bash a grown man with bad social skills and never ask what made him that way. Trust me, nobody wants bad social skills. It's just the cards they were dealt.

People can tell if you're on their level or not. In my adolescence I tried to befriend certain people and was never invited into their circles. I thought I was fooling them by pretending to be something I wasn't. They knew what the deal was the whole time. It doesn't take long for people to get the download on you. Once you've been labeled, once you've been branded, it never comes off. It's stuck with you forever. That sounds harsh, and it is harsh, but I'd rather a young man hear it from me now than figure it out in his thirties the way I did.

TRYING TOO HARD TO FIT IN

I didn't take my label lying down. I tried. Lord knows I tried.

I was about eleven years old when I went to the beauty supply store and bought bandanas so I could look like the Hot Boys and the Big Tymers: Lil Wayne, Turk, B.G., Juvenile, Birdman, Mannie Fresh. I watched BET every day and I thought being a thug was the coolest thing a boy could be. I sagged my pants. I put aluminum foil in my mouth to look like I had a grill. In high school I wore Sean John with two picks in my hair and a Braves fitted, doing my little diddy bop like P. Diddy. Later I was wearing basketball jerseys and smoking Black & Milds, thinking I was a big boss.

I wasn't fooling anybody. A guy in high school told me straight out that I tried too hard to fit in. At fifteen, running errands in a barbershop, a barber asked me if I got picked on, because I looked like the kind of kid who did. At nineteen, working produce at the grocery store, a coworker called me an L7, which is a square. Somebody else at that store was surprised I listened to rap and not gospel. The guys I thought I was fooling saw me as lame the whole time and kept me out of their cliques. Why you think you're fooling somebody? People can smell it on you.

I want to be honest about why I was doing it. I thought that's how you got girls. I watched too much BET and listened to too much rap, and I swore women weren't checking for me because I wasn't a dope boy from the projects moving that base. All I wanted at that age was to be rich and have women. The seeds that got planted in me said: be hard, be from the trenches, or be nobody.

Looking back, what I was doing has a name. I was trying to impress people. Showing off, being the showboat, that belongs to middle school and high school, when everybody wants to fit in and everybody wants to be accepted. The trouble was that none of it was in me. I was a suburban church kid in a bandana, and everybody could see the church kid.

OLD SCHOOL IN A CORDUROY BLAZER

Underneath all the bandanas, I was exactly what they said I was. When I was a teenager, people used to tell me, "You don't think like a teenager. You think like a grown person." They called me old school. I wore corduroy blazers to high school. I always loved the conservative, elegant look: shirt and tie, polka-dot tie, cognac in a glass. By my twenties I was in suits with stacks of GQ and Esquire in my room. I've always been out of sync with my generation.

I got it honestly. I was mostly raised by my grandparents, and my father is the man who listens to heavy metal and put me on Kenny Chesney. The men on my father's side of the family were conservative,

educated men, the kind most people in the culture would call sellouts. Think of Esquire in the movie ATL, the Ivy League brother who plays golf; that's the type I grew up around. My father says you are what you come from, and he's right. An old mentality in a teenager from the Atlanta suburbs gets you looked at like you're from another planet. For years I couldn't put my finger on why people looked at me strange. Now I know. I didn't fit the narrative.

And I kept getting told so. At twenty-one, my little brother's babysitter took one look at me and filed me under nerd. At twenty-four a guy told me I was dressing like a snowman, meaning a white man. Women have told me I seemed like a preacher. Not long ago, working a holiday job in a mailroom full of folks who were rough around the edges, two women laughed and told me my energy reminded them of Carlton Banks. A white guy had told me the same thing once. I don't have tattoos, I don't have dreads, I don't talk slang, and I speak clearly. That was enough.

That's the trap a brother gets put in. For a brother, there is no in between. It's either you from the hood, you gangster, you a headbuster, or you a nerd. Thugged out or Carlton. I never understood why being hood became the standard of Black manhood, but it did, and if you don't fit that stereotype, you're automatically going to be seen as an outcast. I caught hell for that my whole adolescence, and it's one of the main reasons I've always been so insecure within myself.

IT'S OKAY TO BE SQUARE

Now let me tell you what I finally figured out, because this part is for the young men.

Everybody wants to be part of the in crowd in middle school and high school. Peer pressure is real. It really is. But fitting in is young people stuff, and the older you get the more you see that none of it mattered. We wasted middle school, high school and our twenties worrying about

being cool instead of our studies or building something. Nobody who called you lame ever put a dollar in your pocket.

It's okay to be square. It's okay to be lame. You don't have to fit in with the in crowd. Being square can keep you out of prison. It can keep you from getting killed. You'll be lame and not in prison. You'll be lame getting some money, as you should be. You'll be lame eating some fettuccine at a nice Italian restaurant. You'll be lame and not in the graveyard.

*Nobody who called you lame ever put a dollar in
your pocket.*

I'm not being cute. Trying to fit in with people who are not on your level can put you in the graveyard or in prison. I grew up in the suburbs, but I kept trying to hang around guys from a different side of life. Much later I asked myself why, because I was never raised in the trenches. I learned by trial and error that a lot of the people in my life were not good for me. Bad company corrupts good character. Whoever you take instruction from, that's who you're going to become like, and the only rewards in being a street ninja are prison or the graveyard. There is no college degree, there is no PhD, there is no ultimate reward for being a gangster.

You don't have to adapt to nobody else's program. You adapt to your own program. Ask yourself: would these people adjust themselves for you? If not, why are you adjusting yourself for them? Anyone who tries to make you adapt to their program is not a friend. Cut them off.

Here is my rule now, and I wish I'd had it at fifteen. Never befriend people who don't have your same demon. Outcasts with outcasts, suburban with suburban. If you grew up with a mom and dad and a decent family, hang around people who were raised like you, because the

hood mentality does not mix with yours and it will cost you. If you grew up suburban, embrace that. Pour a glass of Nicolas Feuillatte and embrace being from the suburbs.

And understand what the chasing does to you. If you're living your life trying to impress people, you'll never truly be happy, because you're looking for validation and approval. When you don't get it, you get mad and miserable, and you stay stuck in that cycle of keeping up with the Joneses. Living for approval comes from a void inside you, and the approval never fills it. Pleasing people is a losing game anyway. People are extremely judgmental, and they will always have something to say.

Once you stop chasing acceptance, something opens up. Once you get to a point where you don't care about acceptance from other people, that's when you truly be free as a person. You cannot change how people perceive you, so do what suits you. If you like slacks and Santoni oxfords and cashmere sweaters, wear them. If you like classical music, play it. If folks feel you're soft or lame or a square, let them feel that way. Life goes on. At thirty-six, that's where I am. Who cares about all that? That's middle school, high school crap.

YOUNG LOVE IS A RARE DIAMOND

I can tell you to stop caring what people think, and I mean it. But I'd be lying if I said the formative years only cost me some friendships and some cool points. The real cost was love, and that one I never got back.

As a teenager you're not expected to have a whole lot of stuff, so if a female like you as a teenager, that's genuine right there. No money, no car, no status. Teen love is kind of like getting a rare diamond, because it's not something that a lot of people get to experience. The guys who got it grew up with a confidence and an esteem that money can't buy. Those are the husbands and fathers now. The guys who never got it became the twenty-five-year-olds, the thirty-year-olds, who had never had anybody.

I was the second kind. My anxiety around girls was on steroids. I used to have to write notes to girls because I got too nervous to talk, and I would feel sweat dripping down my arm and my heart beating like a drum. I watched some dudes get girls so easily and effortlessly, and I could not figure out how they did it. I thought you had to put yourself out there and trick off with Gucci and Prada. I didn't go on my first date until I was nineteen, and the few dates after that led nowhere. Nobody ever put the ball in my court, and I didn't even learn that girls give signals to the boys they like until my mid-twenties, because I had never received one.

*Teen love is kind of like getting a rare diamond,
because it's not something that a lot of people get to
experience.*

If you're a teenager and you're nervous and insecure around females, I'll tell you where that comes from. It comes from not being wanted. A boy the girls like is never nervous. That's why all the talk about "just be confident" never made sense to me. What was I supposed to be confident about?

I understood it even then. At fifteen I told myself I would never have a girlfriend, based on how people treated me and what my own family members said. How you start is how you finish. Young love is the foundation for everything. If you never were a hit with the ladies as an adolescent, more than likely it's not going to turn around for you. I predicted my whole love life as a fifteen-year-old, and I was right. I missed the boat, and a man who misses that boat stays underdeveloped in a way the rest of the world can see.

I'll say the softer thing too, because it's also true. The nervousness itself goes away. In my thirties I'm not nervous around women at all. It's

all a part of the growing-up process, and I laugh to myself sometimes remembering how I was at fifteen. But the thing I needed those years for, the foundation, the rare diamond, that did not come later. I've cried listening to Chris Brown sing about young love, because I know exactly what he's singing about and I know I never had it. I wish life was like a movie that you could press rewind on. I wish it was, but life is not like that. If I had one wish, I'd go back to my formative years and be one of the chosen dudes. I'd probably have a wife and a David Yurman ring on my finger right now.

SHELTERED FROM THE WOLVES

My parents split before I could talk; that story belongs to the next chapter. I was raised mostly by my grandparents, with my stepfather and my real father in and out, and I grew up in church. Deep in church. I want to lay out both sides of that upbringing, because I got some of the best guidance a boy could get and some of the worst preparation.

Start with the preparation. Being raised overly sheltered makes you green. You grow up dumbfounded to a lot of things. I was beat over the head with the Bible, and the church taught me that if I was a good person, good things would come to me, and that everybody I met had a good heart like I did. My mother was trusting and naive, quick to give everybody the benefit of the doubt, and that nature got passed down to me, while my father gave it to me raw. Just because you got a pure heart, just because you got good intentions, that don't mean other people do. Being very open and being very nice invites disrespect into your life. I got used because of it. If I had to choose, I'd say it is better to be raised overly exposed than overly sheltered.

Meanwhile there were boys at my school who were light-years ahead of me at fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, and I could not understand why. They already had grown-folks' minds, and I still had a kid's mentality. Now I know. They'd been exposed to everything early, the sex, the drugs, the

violence, and they had already learned to read people and move with an edge. I used to watch hood documentaries as a teenager and imagine what my life would have been in those conditions. I don't glorify it. When the wolves come out, they come out to feast, and even the kids who grew up around them don't wish they'd been raised that way. But growing up around the wolves teaches you real life, and those kids had a head start on me.

Now the guidance. My grandparents gave me wise counsel, and a lot of what I quote on camera is stuff they instilled in me. My father at least told me how real life was going to get. Between the two, I wasn't completely clueless when I got out here. My father always pushed me and my stepbrother to read, and that's why I read now. He used to say there's more to raising a child than feeding him and putting him in front of a TV; you have to teach him things. He told me to be careful who I take instruction from, and that kids don't need to be around everybody, because the wrong people will erase the values you put in them.

That's the whole job, the way I see it. It's your parents' job to put you in a position to win, to prepare you for adulthood and for what you're going to face when you get out here in the world. Parents, if you have teens, tell them the truth about life early. The world is not going to pacify them. The world is going to give it to them raw and uncut, so they might as well have parents who give it to them raw and uncut. And remember what my father told me and my stepbrother over and over: "Life is a timed art. You a kid now, you'll be grown tomorrow."

MESSAGE TO THE YOUNG GUYS

I assume I'm talking to men in their thirties, but I know a lot of you are younger than me. So let me talk to the fifteen-year-old, the nineteen-year-old, directly.

If I could tell my younger teenage self any words of wisdom, I'd just tell myself, prepare for the beatdown. It does not get better just because

you got older. I'm living proof. The teen years are the test drive for your adult life, and if the girls are giving you the cold shoulder now, I'm not going to lie to you and say it flips at twenty-five. It's beautiful when you accept that early, because it makes the rest of life easier to gauge. A lot of dudes including myself who've never been desired should have had somebody telling us at fifteen, you're not a desirable man, so you're going to have to pay. A lot of guys were gaslit, a lot of guys were ridiculed, a lot of guys were lied to, and that's what hindered a lot of us.

Don't take advice from men who've always been wanted. They live in a different reality and don't even know it. If a woman is interested she will make it easy, and if you got to beg somebody to give you the time of day, you already lost.

Now the other side, because I owe you this too. Don't beat yourself up over things that you didn't know at fifteen. You were young. You think you're grown as a teenager, but looking back from thirty-six, you're a kid at those ages. Life is a learning journey. Just don't put things in the atmosphere you can't take back. Regardless of what you're going through in life, you still have to have some kind of dignity about yourself.

A few more things I learned the hard way. Don't hand your kindness to strangers, because people take kindness for weakness. Stay in your lane and keep quiet. If you're trying to better yourself, keep it to yourself, because most people will discourage you before they encourage you. Your intuition never lies.

And you don't have nothing to prove to nobody. Not to the in crowd, not to the barber, not to the coworker who called you an L7, not to the women in the mailroom. If you were groomed to be a quiet, conservative, suburban kid who reads books and wears a collared shirt, embrace it. That's who you were raised to be. If I'm a sellout or a lame because I choose not to conform, then I'll just be a sellout and a lame. I'm still here, and I'm still dressed the way I like.

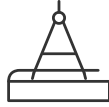
Once you're in your thirties you really stop caring about a lot of stuff. A lot of the things that used to matter really don't matter. I wish I'd had

that mindset at fifteen. I didn't, so I'm handing it to you now.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ Hell starts the day you start liking girls, because that's the day the cliques start handing out labels.
- ☛ The bullies and the cliques never change when they grow up; they just get jobs and car payments.
- ☛ Your appearance is your credentials, and the grown world reads the same ones the lunchroom did.
- ☛ Chasing approval comes from a hole inside you, and no amount of approval ever fills it.
- ☛ Lame with money and a plate of fettuccine beats cool in a cell or a casket.
- ☛ The in crowd charges your real self at the door, and it's never worth the price.
- ☛ If a girl liked you when you had nothing, that was a rare diamond; if nobody did, accept it early so it doesn't break you later.
- ☛ Being overly sheltered makes you green, so learn to read people before the wolves teach you.
- ☛ You don't have nothing to prove to nobody; wear the blazer, read the book, and let them call you Carlton.



CHAPTER THREE

PARENTS ARE THE BLUEPRINT



“People can only teach you what they know. If a person doesn’t know how to get to the next level, they can’t teach you how to get to the next level.”

When I was eleven years old, my father and my uncle got into a brawl at my grandparents’ house. Not an argument. A brawl. They tore that house up, and the police came. And what were they fighting about? Me. My father was telling me some things about life, about people, about the way the world was going to look at me, and my uncle did not like it. He told my father he didn’t need to be telling that boy that. My father disagreed, and you already know how that ended.

I think about that scene a lot now. That is my whole childhood in one picture. One side of the family wanted me told the truth, raw, no chaser. The other side wanted me protected from it. I’ve lived long enough to see how it played out, and I’ll tell you which side I give the praise to.

Your parents are your first teachers. Before school, before church, before the streets, there is a person standing over your crib deciding what you’re going to believe about the world. Whatever they put in you is what

comes out of you twenty years later. That's not a theory. I watched it happen in my own life.

So this chapter is about the blueprint. Who gave me mine, who tried to take it away from me, and what I would hand to a child of my own if I ever had one.

YOU ARE WHAT YOU COME FROM

My father has a saying, and he has said it to me my whole life: "You are what you come from." For a long time I thought it was just something old folks say. Now I think it's the most accurate thing anybody ever told me.

People are nothing more than carbon copies of their parents and whoever raised them. Whoever you spent the most time around, that's going to determine your mental. And I mean whoever. If a boy spends most of his hours with the OGs on the block, then the OGs on the block are his legal guardians, I don't care whose name is on the birth certificate. Whoever a child spends most of his time with, that's the parent.

Part of it is genetics, and you can't cheat genetics. A cat raised in a house full of dogs is still a cat. Whatever kind of man you have your child by, that's the kind of person your child is going to be. I've watched mothers try to raise a boy to be the opposite of a father they can't stand, and nature wins every time. You can tweak a child. You can't rewrite him.

Look at where I come from. My father's side of the family is educated people. My grandmother was an English teacher. Both of my grandparents had degrees. My grandfather was a hellion in his younger days, but that house valued education and raised successful children anyway. My uncle is a lawyer out in Arizona. My father has a college degree, did four years in the Navy, and has been a union electrician since 2003. Today he's a master electrician. That is the cloth I was cut from.

My mother came from a different place. She and my aunt came up in the ghetto. I look a little like my mother, but I don't think like her at all,

because I spent more time at my grandparents' house than I ever did with her. I got more of my father's genes and more of my grandparents' hours. That's why I quote them and not her.

Here's the part people don't like to hear. You can't choose any of this. If you're in a bad position in life, it's no fault of your own. It's just the hand you were dealt. You are what you come from, and if you were raised by people who knew nothing, don't fault yourself for coming up short. Everybody is the sum of what happened to them.

THE WORLD IS NOT GOING TO LIE TO YOUR KID

You already know what my father warned me about women when I was fourteen, and I'll tell that story properly when we get to attraction. He also told me that humans are not equal, and that people can dislike you for nothing more than your face. He was giving me the blueprint from the time I was young. That's why there's nothing a person can tell me now. I got the blueprint young.

People in my comments say he should never have told me any of that. Most fathers wouldn't. But I'm going to defend him, because look at the end result. The proof is in the pudding. You just have to look at how my life turned out. Everything he said came true. If he had fed me a fairy tale, I would have found out the hard way anyway, just later and with more heartache. Instead I got something most men never get: forewarning. It's a great thing to have someone letting you know what the future has in store for you. When the disappointments came, they weren't a surprise. That gives a man a strange kind of peace.

Now compare that to what most parents do. Most parents don't want to hurt their kids' feelings. But you know what? The world won't spare your child's feelings. The world is going to let your child know he's a loser, ugly, inferior, not wanted. So why would you soften it at home? The world is not going to lie to your kid, so you as a parent don't need to lie to your children.

And children don't stay kids forever. They grow up to be adults one day, and they're going to see you for the real piece of work that you are. That's why so many grown men don't talk to their parents. Parents who lie to their children are creating enemies.

The world is not going to lie to your kid, so you as a parent don't need to lie to your children.

Real is like some nasty vegetables. You don't want to eat it, because it doesn't taste good, but it's good for you. A lie goes down easy. A lie is also like a doctor misdiagnosing you. It feels better in the office, and then you die of the thing he didn't tell you about. Bad advice is just as bad as no advice. Let that marinate.

My grandparents meant well, and I'll get to everything they gave me, but they handed me one lie too, the one about just being good and everything working out. I already told you what that one cost me.

My mother went further. She told me, more than once, that sometimes it's permissible to lie. That's bad parenting 101. A parent who lies to a child is a parent who doesn't care about that child. The truth may hurt your feelings and get you down and out, but it is always more satisfying than a lie, because once you know the truth, nobody can tell you any lies anymore.

PEOPLE CAN ONLY TEACH YOU WHAT THEY KNOW

So what did they actually teach me, the people I give the praise to? Let me put it on the table, because people act like I pull this stuff out of the air. When I make these Life of Hell conversations, I'm not just talking

out of my behind. These are seeds that were planted in me when I was a kid.

My grandparents mostly raised me. My mother would drop me off there, over and over, and then later call them sellouts for what they put in me. I was a latchkey kid in elementary school, and my grandmother would sit out in the parking lot until she saw me get in the house safe. Their house was regimented. She would send me into the den to sit with my grandfather and watch ball games and cowboy movies, because she understood a boy needs to be around a man. That's a childhood. That's structure.

When I was seven or eight, I came home from church and told my grandfather the preacher said lust was a sin, and he told me, "Son, lust is normal." He told me you cannot beat the system, that the law is airtight and will come get you eventually. He told me water seeks its own level. And he told me, "Son, everything you have now was given to you, and the older you get, the less people are going to do for you." I was a kid. I didn't know what he meant. I know now.

When I was a teenager, it was my grandfather who sat me down and had the birds-and-the-bees talk with me. Not my mother. She never had that conversation with me, not once. Between my father, my grandfather and my grandmother, I had people in my corner telling me real information, and that's what saved me. I got lucky. A lot of boys don't.

Then there's my father. "Don't focus on materialism, focus on the knowledge, and the things that you have will be an extension of what you know." He made me and my stepbrother read books and watch historical documentaries when we would rather have been watching rap videos. I didn't understand it then. Now I watch physicists debate on my own time. He taught me that whatever doesn't touch your money doesn't carry much weight. He told me you don't need to know everything, you just need to know what matters, and that nothing in life comes to you but a dream.

He told me to consider the source, because everybody is not worth listening to. He told me, “I don’t take care of grown people,” and my grandfather’s rule was out of the house at eighteen. For my birthday in 2016 he gave me *The 48 Laws of Power*, and he asked me, “How you going to be good when the world is not good?”

Even my father’s buddy got in on it. When I was very young he told me there’s no crime in being ignorant, the crime is remaining ignorant. I still call that man for financial advice. Guidance doesn’t stop at eighteen.

Here’s the limit, though, and it’s the whole point of this chapter. People can only teach you what they know, nothing more, nothing less. People are like computers. They can only run what was programmed into them. Somebody who has no direction in life can’t give you any. If your parents were handed nothing, they have nothing to hand you, and that traces back to who raised them. That’s why I say life is a lottery. And guidance has to be daily. The regimen at my grandparents’ house got undone every time I went back to my mother’s, where there was none.

BROKEN HOMES PRODUCE BROKEN PEOPLE

My parents split before I could talk. My father wanted to be in my life. I need to say that clearly, because the story people tell about brothers is that they leave. Mine didn’t. My mother kept trying to find another man to take his place. She wanted me to be some old church type of man, a preacher boy, and it was not in my DNA. My father told me something back then that I didn’t understand until I was grown: “Your mother is not hurting me by keeping you away. She’s hurting you.”

When you have kids, it’s not about you, it’s about those kids. So regardless of how you feel about those kids’ father, that’s still their daddy. If you’ve got a man who is decent and wants to be there, why keep him away? A lot of it is spite. A woman feels like she’s getting back at the man, but the man goes on with his life. The child is the one who pays.

I'm going to say it the way my father said it: broken homes produce broken people. Kids need a stable environment, and boys especially need a man in the house. My father put it even plainer: "A woman cannot raise a boy to be a man." It takes a man to make a man. A mother can comfort you. She can't teach you about the wolves, because she's never had to be one. My father taught me that a man needs a peaceful side and a side that's ready for war. He taught me, "You cannot be a man unless you're willing to die," that when somebody breaks into your house you don't hide in the closet quoting scripture. Nobody is coming to save a man. My mother couldn't have told me that, because she didn't know it.

I won't pretend my father is a soft man. He has a hard temper, and that side of him that's ready for war is real. My mother says that's why she left him. I think it was that he was too honest for her. My father was too real for this world, and some people just can't live next to that much honesty.

I've also seen what happens when a mother who never took instruction from a man raises her son to be the husband she never had. Docile, church-ed out, counting on him to buy her a house one day. Your son is not supposed to be your husband. That's not the order of things.

I lived with my father when I was fourteen. Eighth grade, 2003. He had me playing football at Luella Middle School. We were on a championship team that went to the playoffs, even though most of those boys had been playing since Little League and I was just starting. I didn't understand then why fathers push their sons into sports. I do now. Sports teach you to keep trying when you're at a deficit. They give you an aggressive edge, because you can't always be nice. If I could rewind the hands of time to fourteen, living with my dad, I would have stayed.

My father and my uncle were star football players from Little League up. One of my younger cousins is playing college ball right now and getting looked at by the NFL. My dad tells me, "Son, had I raised you, you'd be in the NFL." I've got the size. I believe him. You can call it a fantasy if you want to. It's the one daydream I let myself keep.

And it has to be two parents on the same page. You need two parents giving you the same source of information. One parent saying green light while the other says red light will tear a kid apart. Mine were never on the same page, and I grew up in the middle of that. I had one honest parent, and that is the only reason I'm not totally clueless. Imagine the boys who had none.

Because when the parents don't raise the child, somebody will. If you're not raising your kids, the streets are going to raise them. In the culture I grew up around, being a man was defined by the street, the block and the criminal life, and for a lot of young people that's the only picture of a man they ever see. I see children, eight, nine, twelve years old, walking around with guns, and people want to blame the child. You can't blame the child. That's terrible, when the streets are the only place you're getting guidance from.

I FORGAVE BUT I HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN

Now let me talk about my mother, and let me be fair before I'm blunt.

She gave me a computer one Christmas, talked to me about owning my own business, covered my bedroom wall with Black history heroes, and told me once not to measure my smarts by school, which was some of the realest advice she ever gave me.

But I'll say it plain. I love my mother, but I don't like her.

I care for both of my parents, don't get me wrong. But I value what my father has to say more than what my mother has to say. When I think about all the good seeds my father planted in me growing up, I can't find the matching pile on her side. My mother never told me anything real. Not about women, not about what they were going to look at, not about how the world was going to see me. My grandfather had to have that talk with me. I still don't understand how a mother sits back, watches her son suffer, and doesn't give him one word of wisdom.

She was emotionally unavailable. She was dismissive. For years she called me a broken record. It's funny how somebody can call you a broken record and not even listen when you're speaking. Every time I tried to tell her about my situation, she blew me off with "well, anyway," or acted like I had never been through anything. That has always burned me up. How do you not care that your children are in bad positions? Acting like a problem doesn't exist doesn't fix the problem.

She spent my whole childhood discrediting the people who were giving me the blueprint. When I repeated my grandmother's dating advice to her in 2018, she asked me when I was going to let go of the ignorance my grandparents and my father had put in me. She called them sellouts, and then kept dropping me off at their house. She painted my father as the bad guy. Everybody in my family told me he was crazy, and for years, as a kid, I thought my daddy was crazy. He even said it himself: "Real is crazy." Now I see who the real crazy one was. If you've got people in your family trying to turn you against the one person who always kept it a hundred with you, that ought to tell you who the real enemy is.

If you don't have any wisdom to give someone, why not humble yourself and let the person who has the wisdom give it?

Here's the lesson in it for parents, and it's one of the simplest things in this book: listen to your children. Keep an open ear even when you disagree. A lot of parents have too much pride and ego to admit they're wrong. Some parents won't even admit they don't know how to be a parent. It doesn't make you less of a man or less of a woman to say you need help. But dismissing your child every time he opens his mouth? That's the kind of behavior that makes your children hate you. A kid with nobody to vent to holds everything in, and we see on the news what that turns into.

That doesn't mean be his buddy. Being a parent is different from being your child's friend, and kids pay for that mix-up too. Parent means you listen, you tell the truth, and you still run the house.

So when Mother's Day comes around and everybody is buying Louis Vuitton bags, understand that the men doing that had mothers who went beyond the call of duty. You've got to call a spade a spade. If a parent hasn't done the best they can do, they don't deserve to be celebrated. I don't hate my mother. But I keep a mental note. You may not have had the worst mother, but you dag on sure didn't have the best one either. I forgave. I haven't forgotten.

IF I WERE A PARENT

I'm not a parent. My father told me to keep children off the table until I had a million dollars, and I listened. But people ask me all the time what I'd do, so here it is.

First, I'd tell my kids the truth, and I'd do it in stages, like school. A six-year-old doesn't need the whole hell realm dumped on him. A sixteen-year-old does, before high school teaches it to him the ugly way. And I'd never put grown folks' problems on a child. Kids need the chance to be kids, to dream and to live in that fantasy world, because they'll be grown before they know it. I wanted to be an actor and an astronaut. Let them have that. Once you become an adult, that's when the real boxing match begins.

If my son came to me asking about women, I'd tell him exactly what my father told me. Looks, money, what you have. I'd tell him even if it embarrassed me. If I had a daughter, I'd tell her not to be a narcissist and to look past looks, status and money into a man's soul.

I'd raise them neutral. I wouldn't raise my kids to be jerks, but I wouldn't raise them to be pushovers either. You don't want to be taken advantage of in this world, and you don't want to be a doormat. Discerning. Being raised meek and humble programs you to be a chump, and I know because I was that chump. I'd make sure my son knew that just because a brother is from the suburbs, that doesn't mean he won't bust your head.

I would not take them to church. I'm not telling anybody what to believe about God, but the fear of the devil they put in me as a boy kept me up at night for years, and I don't blame myself for that. I blame the church. Children should be thinking about school, sports and fun, not Satan coming to get them.

They would not listen to rap. My stepfather used to take my CDs when I was a teenager, and my real father never cared what I listened to. I see my stepfather's point now. Whatever seeds are planted in children when they're young are going to blossom when they get older.

They'd go to private school. My grandparents had the money for it. My mother wouldn't give them or my father custody, so I went through urban schools, where a brother raised the way I was raised gets ostracized. Association leads to assimilation. Whoever you allow your kids to be around, that's who they're going to become. I'd tell my kids straight about the opposition they'll face as Black kids, but I wouldn't put them in a building where being decent is called lame. I saw an older man at a Middle Eastern restaurant one night, Ferragamo loafers, no socks, slacks, long-sleeve shirt tucked in, and I thought, that's how I'd want my kids dressed walking into school. And I'd know their friends.

They'd read. Cut off the rap music, cut off the TV and pick up a book. If a child was struggling, I'd get a tutor or sit at the table with him myself. They'd learn money young, because other communities have their kids investing before they can drive, and I'm in my thirties with a few dollars in stocks trying to catch up. They'd learn a skill or a trade from the beginning. If I'd been listening to my father in my early twenties, I'd have skipped college and gone straight to trade school, instead of sitting in automotive classes at thirty-six. If you don't have money to give your kids, at least have some brains to give your kids.

And I'd be realistic with them about what they're capable of. Everybody can't be a doctor or play in the league. If my son didn't have what it takes for something, I'd tell him, suggest another road, and let him

keep going if he insisted. No bashing. It doesn't mean you're less than. You're just not cut out for it.

*If you don't have money to give your kids, at least
have some brains to give your kids.*

Most of all, I'd keep the goal in front of me. When you have kids, your number one goal should be to put them in a position where they won't have the same challenges you had. That's the whole job. My father's rule, the one I've repeated in a hundred videos, is that if your parents didn't put you in a position to win, if they didn't teach you anything, they failed you. It's a hard rule. It's also the only one that makes sense.

And if you're reading this as a grown man who never got any of it, hear this part too. If you caught on to the truth about life late, don't beat yourself up over it. As a kid you were at the mercy of whoever raised you. Later is better than never. I'm sitting at a kitchen table at thirty-six with a textbook open. You can still get the blueprint. It just costs more when you have to buy it yourself.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ You are what you come from, and if you were raised by people who knew nothing, your struggle is not your fault.
- ☛ The world is not going to lie to your kid, so you don't need to either.
- ☛ A parent who lies to a child is making an enemy for later.
- ☛ People can only teach you what they know, so find out early what your people actually know.
- ☛ A woman cannot raise a boy to be a man, and a boy without a man in the house will go find one on the block.
- ☛ If the father wants to be there, let him be there, because the child is the one who pays for your spite.
- ☛ If you have real people in your corner, weigh their word above the ones who only tell you what feels good.
- ☛ Listen to your children even when you disagree, because dismissing them is how you lose them.
- ☛ If you don't have money to give your kids, at least have some brains to give them.
- ☛ Let kids be kids: school, sports and fun, not nightmares about the devil.

*“You need to be concerned about you,
because other people are concerned about
themselves.”*



MY FATHER



CHAPTER FOUR

FAMILY ARE THOSE WHO SHOW CONCERN



“Family are those who show loyalty to you. It’s not necessarily blood relation.”

A young woman at my job brought me a cake and a bottle of Moët rosé on my birthday. I didn’t ask her to. She just remembered. I’m standing there at work holding this cake, and the thought that hit me wasn’t about her at all. It was that not one of my relatives had called. Not a text, not a card, nothing. A girl I see a few hours a day at a job remembered my special day, and the people who share my blood couldn’t be bothered.

That’s not a one-time thing. That’s the pattern of my whole adult life. It’s crazy when a stranger remembers your special day but your own family can’t. Once you see that pattern you can’t unsee it. Relatives are strangers, just people you so happen to be related to.

I didn’t come to this easily. I fought it for years. A buddy of mine in Texas had been telling me since way back, “Them people don’t love you

like you think they do. Stay away from your family.” Other people in my corner said the same thing. I thought they were being dramatic. I thought they were joking, or being sarcastic. I grew up in church, I grew up hearing that blood is thicker than water and family will always have your back, and I wanted to believe it. I wanted it so bad that I kept reaching out and kept showing up for every holiday, thinking that at least these people wouldn’t judge me.

They did. They do. This chapter is about the day I stopped pretending otherwise, and about the few people who showed me what family really is.

BLOOD IS NOT THICKER THAN WATER

When I was a little boy, Christmas morning was the best day of the year. I’d wake up excited. There were toys, there was Christmas music playing, and the house smelled like a tree from those scent plug-ins. My cousins were around, the family felt close, and I thought that’s how it would always be. If I had one wish today, I’d go back to being a kid.

Here’s what nobody tells you when you’re little. Family feels close when you’re a kid because little is expected of children and people love kids. Everybody’s nice to a ten-year-old at the cookout. Your cousins play with you, your aunts pinch your cheeks, and you think that’s what family is. Then you grow up, and the people who were hugging you at eight don’t know your phone number at thirty.

I used to think blood was thicker than water. I used to think family will always have your back. I thought that even if the whole world turned against me, there’d be a table somewhere with my people around it who’d take me in. That’s a beautiful idea. In my experience it’s also a lie from the gates of Hades.

My father always said that game time begins when you’re an adult. He said it over and over, and I didn’t understand him until I lived it. Once people become adults, they become who they truly are. As a kid, people

hide their true colors. As an adult, they show you exactly how they feel about you, and they don't care who's watching. Once you become an adult, no one cares anything about you. Not strangers, not coworkers, and not relatives.

I always wanted a close-knit family. I'll say that plainly because I don't want anybody thinking I came to this bitter from the start. I wanted the family that gets together on Sundays, that calls to check on each other, that shows up. I've looked at other communities and seen families that stick together, and I used to wonder why mine couldn't. What I learned is that in the family I come from, that's a dream. And I had to admit something to myself that took me years to say out loud: I don't have a family. I have relatives.

Just because somebody is related to you, that doesn't mean they care for you. That's the whole chapter in one sentence. Everything else is me showing you how I found it out.

WHEN IS THE LAST TIME YOUR FAMILY CONTACTED YOU?

Here's the test. It's simple and it doesn't lie. Ask yourself when was the last time one of your relatives picked up the phone to see how you were doing. Not when you called them. When they called you. If you have to sit there and think about it, you already have your answer.

People make time for things that they really care about, and if a person is really concerned about you, they'll reach out to you. For years I made excuses for my relatives. They're busy. They got kids. They got their own problems. But busy people still text their friends. Busy people still find time for the folks they actually want to hear from. Silence isn't busyness. Silence is a message. When you have relatives that do not contact you, that is a clear indication that they do not care for you.

I used to be the one who reached out. I'd call around the holidays, I'd go by, I'd bring gifts. I gave one relative a cereal bowl from Hermès for

Christmas. An Hermès bowl, and this person never once called to ask how life was treating me. I've bought Saks Fifth Avenue gifts for people who couldn't be bothered to wish me happy birthday. How you going to give somebody a bowl from Hermès when they don't even call you? That was me being a fool. And when you extend yourself to people more than they extend themselves to you, they don't think you're generous. They think you're slow. They think you're dumb. They respect you less for it.

My grandmother used to say it all the time when I was a kid: you give people what they give you. If a person respects you, you respect them. If they don't have any respect for you, you don't give them any. My father said the same thing in his own words. Give people the same energy that they give you. I heard that a thousand times growing up and it didn't sink in until my thirties. Now I live by it. If they're not reaching out to me, why should I reach out to them?

So I stopped. I don't call. I don't go by. I don't send the Christmas text. And you know what happened? Nothing. The phone didn't ring any less than it was already not ringing. That's how I knew.

I'm not going to pretend that was easy to swallow. One of the hardest things in the world for me to do was to accept that my family don't care nothing about me. It's demoralizing. It's a tough pill to swallow. I never wanted to swallow this pill, but it's the honest truth. And here's the strange part: once I got it down, things got lighter. Once you accept that your relatives and these so-called loved ones don't care anything about you, it makes it easier to move on with your life. You stop waiting for a call that isn't coming. You stop being disappointed by people who were never going to show up. That's a kind of peace.

THEY JUDGE YOU JUST LIKE STRANGERS DO

Now let me get into why they don't call, because it isn't random. Relatives look at you the same way strangers look at you. They look at

what you have. They look at your face, your money, your status, whether you got a wife and kids. And if you come up short, they treat you exactly the way the world treats a man who comes up short. They keep their distance.

I'm a grown man in my mid-thirties with no wife and no children. In my family, that gets noticed. Nobody will say it to your face, but every time you show up alone to another gathering, you can feel them reading into it. What's wrong with him? Why doesn't he have anybody? They hold it against you. A single woman doesn't get that same look. A man without a woman and without money gets written off as a failure, and relatives are no different from anyone else in that regard. If anything they're harder on you, because they've known you your whole life. They have the download on you. A stranger only sees today. Your family remembers every bad year.

In my teens and twenties I thought I could hide it. I really believed that if I dressed nice and smelled good, nobody could tell anything was wrong in my life. So I'd show up to the family barbecue in a cashmere sweater, Rag & Bone jeans, a clean pair of Air Force Ones and Tom Ford cologne, thinking nobody would know. I thought I was incognito. I wasn't. People know when you're jacked up. People are not stupid. They've got a sixth sense for it, and your own relatives know you on a personal level, so they see it faster than anybody. The clothes didn't fool a soul. If anything it made it sadder, a grown man dressed to the nines with nobody on his arm. That's a big reason I don't go to the barbecue anymore.

Here's how I know it's about what you have and not who you are. Picture me hitting the lottery for \$340 million. Relatives I never knew existed would be calling. The cousins who can't find my number today would want to pop bottles. If I'd made it to the NFL, every one of them would be proud of me, and it wouldn't be because my character changed. It would be because now I'm somebody they can benefit from. My father always said everybody wants to be around the winner. If you're homeless

up under a bridge, how many people you think going to be around to celebrate you? Not one. When you're winning, people want to toast Dom Pérignon with you. When you're under the bridge, they drive right past.

Love is based on circumstances, and when those circumstances change, all the love goes out the window. That's family too. If you don't have anything that's valuable, your own family will hate your behind. It hurts to hear, but it explains everything.

So I've already decided how I'm handling it when my automotive career takes off and I'm doing well. If your phone does not ring when you're struggling, be sure not to answer your phone when you start to elevate and prosper. Every relative who treated me like a ghost when my finances were shaky is going to get the voicemail. Don't call me when you see me pull up in the Alfa Romeo. Don't call me when you see the Brioni suit, or smell the Creed Silver Mountain Water. Don't call me when I'm drinking Louis XIII out of Baccarat crystal on a yacht in Monaco, or eating capellini in Nice. Keep that same energy. Keep the same energy of never calling me, never texting me, never reaching out. I'm not bitter about it, I'm consistent about it. You showed me who you were at the bottom. I'm going to believe you at the top.

*You showed me who you were at the bottom. I'm
going to believe you at the top.*

EVERYBODY GOT BEEF

How many of you have families that are not close? My family is not close. Everybody got beef with each other. Somebody did something twenty years ago and two people haven't spoken since. Somebody said something at a funeral and now there's two sides to the family. Grudges

in my family get held for decades, and I've never seen one of them resolved. It's 2026. Can't you let it go by now?

My family only gets together when somebody dies. That's the only time I see cousins, the only time anybody drives in from out of town. I don't even like funerals. I went to my grandfather's in 2009, when I was twenty, because you go. But I've always thought the whole thing was backwards. Why not pay homage to the living? Don't pay homage to somebody that's dead. They can't hear you. It shouldn't take somebody dying for you to call somebody, for you to act as if you care about somebody. If you can show up for the funeral, you could have shown up for the birthday.

*If you can show up for the funeral, you could have
shown up for the birthday.*

And it's not just coldness. There's real animosity under there, and it can turn violent. I was eleven when my father and my uncle got into it so bad they tore up their own parents' house. I've seen the news stories too, like the brother who shot his own brother in the middle of a family move, with their mother standing there. Over an argument. Just because someone is a relative, it doesn't mean they love you, and it doesn't mean they care for you. Your own relatives can end up being the one to end your chapter.

Then there's the quiet kind of betrayal, the kind that doesn't make the news. Years ago a so-called cousin of mine threw me under the bus to make himself look good in front of a woman. Didn't hesitate. Blood went right out the window the moment a pretty face was involved. A relative who does that is an enemy, cousin or not, and I treat him like one.

And the gossip. In my experience, relatives are the worst gossips there are. My mother's mother can sit for hours running her mouth about

people. I've been in rooms and overheard relatives, people who are supposed to love me, talking crap about me when they thought I couldn't hear. If you could be a fly on the wall, you would be surprised the things some of these relatives are saying about you. They'll smile across the Thanksgiving table, and the minute your car pulls out the driveway, they're on you. Family are very good at pretending.

They're cowards about it, too. Relatives can despise you and never be man or woman enough to say it to your face. That's actually the dangerous part. Unspoken ill feelings sit dormant for years, and then one day something small sets it off and somebody's in the hospital or the ground. I learned a long time ago that if a person burns you, you cut that person out of your life and you don't deal with them anymore, and being a relative is not an exemption. Don't go where you're not wanted. Going where you're not wanted is going to cause you more heartache and pain, and it's how a lot of grown men end up in a confrontation they can't take back.

TELL THEM TO BRING YOU A PLATE

Now I want to talk about the holidays, because that's when all of this comes to a head. They say happy holidays, but let's be real, it's not a happy holiday for everyone. The holidays are built for couples and families. The commercials, the music, the whole season is designed around a man with a wife and kids by a fireplace. Now picture the other man: playing the piano by himself, drinking eggnog by himself, decorating a big tree by himself when a wife and kids should be there helping him. If that's you, the season doesn't feel like a celebration. It feels like a reminder. This is the time of year that you're reminded that you're not loved.

Holidays really show you who down for you. Count how many relatives called you on Thanksgiving. Count how many called on Christmas, on your birthday. If the answer is none, then the people at

that table don't need you there, no matter how big they smile when you walk in. They act like they happy to see you, but yet they haven't called you all year. Ask yourself what that smile is worth.

I used to go around family every holiday. I'd dress up, I'd bring something, I'd sit there and I could feel it. A grown man showing up alone year after year, no wife, no kids, no announcement. Nobody said anything to me, but I could feel them reading into it, and I know what gets said after I leave. At some point I asked myself why I was driving across town to sit with people who only think about me when I'm in front of them. So I quit going.

Here's my practical advice, and I mean it. Just tell them to bring you a plate for the holiday season. Don't bother to go around these people. Let your mother or your father fix you a plate of the turkey and the mac and cheese and the pumpkin pie and drop it off, and you eat it at your own table in peace. You get the food without the fakeness. That's my plan every year now. Pumpkin pie at Halloween, the Thanksgiving food at my own table, and nobody whispering about me when I get up to leave.

I don't cut everybody off. I'll see my father any holiday he wants to link up, because he's the one who always kept it real with me. One New Year's Eve I sat down to a steak dinner with my grandmother and my father, and that's a table I'll sit at any day of the year. The difference is those two have shown concern for me every year of my life, not just when there's a holiday on the calendar. And if I ever do get married, I'll spend the holidays with my wife and her people, and I'll be hoping her family is a close one, because mine isn't.

Whatever you do with the day, don't sit in the house staring at the wall. Get out, go for a walk, treat yourself to something. I'll tell you later in this book how I fill those days. For now, just know that saying no to the family table is not the same as saying no to life.

THE TWO WHO KEPT IT REAL

My grandparents pretty much raised me. So when I talk about relatives not caring, understand I'm not talking about everybody. The only people in this world who have truly cared about me are my father and my grandmother. And the lesson I want you to take from that is bigger than my family. It's about who you keep close.

Think about how Father's Day goes compared to Mother's Day. Everybody goes all out for their mother in May. In June, a father is lucky to get a phone call. In a lot of homes in my community, just having a relationship with your father at all is close to a miracle. I have one, and I'm thankful for it, because he's the one who never sugarcoated anything for me.

He gave me rules I still run my life on. Make decisions that benefit you, not decisions based on what other people tell you that you should do. Nobody cares about a man, so a man has to handle his own business. The older you get, the less people care whether you sink or swim. Most people have bad intentions, so don't hand them your trust for free. And this one, which he said to me directly: "You need to be concerned about you, because other people are concerned about themselves." That sounded selfish when I was young. Now I know he was handing me the only life raft there is. He also told me that even a grown man needs a mentor, somebody he can get things off his chest with.

My biggest problem in life was being too nice and too trusting, and that included relatives. I wanted to believe that people, my own family included, loved me and wanted to see me make it. That mindset held me back and got my feelings hurt more times than I can count. It's why I was buying Hermès bowls for people who never called. Being too nice and being too trusting can get you in a world of disaster. People take kindness for weakness. I learned that the hard way, and some of the lessons came from my own family.

So if you've got somebody in your life who tells you the truth when the truth is ugly, keep that person by your side. Don't let them go. Liars are everywhere. Somebody who loves you enough to be honest with you is not.

FAMILY ARE THOSE WHO SHOW CONCERN

So if relatives aren't family, what is? Here's where I landed. Family are those who show loyalty to you. It's not necessarily blood relation. Family is whoever shows concern for you when there's nothing in it for them.

I have a buddy in Dallas and one in LA I talk to now and then. The one in Texas was the one hammering it into my head that my relatives weren't concerned about me, long before I could hear it. If it ever came down to them under a bridge or me under a bridge, he told me, I'd be the one under the bridge. I didn't want to believe him. He wasn't lying. Neither of those men shares a drop of my blood, and both have shown more concern for my life than the people who do.

It goes further than that. Sometimes you'll find strangers will confide in you and show you more love than your own relatives. Strangers strike up conversations with me all the time. A lady in a store once stopped and prayed with me out of the blue. Then there's the coworker with the cake and the Moët. People with no obligation to me have treated me with more consideration than my own cousins ever have. It's sickening when you think about it, but it also tells you something hopeful. Concern exists. It's just not handed out by bloodline.

If you find some people along the way that are concerned about your well-being, you want to hold on to these people, because that's your family. Don't let them go. You will not meet many of them. Real is rare and fake is everywhere, and when you run into somebody real you treat that like what it is, which is a gift.

And if you were lucky enough to be born into a close-knit family that actually loves you and invests in you, I'm going to say this straight: you

are one of the luckiest people in the world. Don't take that for granted. Don't skip the calls. Don't let a grudge from twenty years ago rot it. A lot of us would trade almost anything for what you have.

For the rest of us, here's the hard version. In this world, you all you got. When you realize you don't have nobody, that's a big rude awakening. But it's also the beginning of getting yourself together. Being by yourself is one of the best things in the world, because you can't betray yourself and you can't do yourself wrong. Being alone keeps you out of the arguments, out of the drama, out of the confrontations that put relatives in jail or in the ground. Anything that steals your peace has to go, and that includes anybody with your last name.

I still wish things were different. I'd be lying if I told you I didn't want the Sunday dinners and the cousins who call. But wishing is how I lost years. Seeing it for what it is gave me my life back. Give people what they give you. Hold on to anybody who shows concern. Let everybody else keep that same energy.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ Just because somebody is related to you does not mean they care for you.
- ☛ When is the last time your family contacted you? If you have to think about it, you have your answer.
- ☛ Silence is not busyness; people make time for whoever they actually care about.
- ☛ Give relatives the same energy they give you, because a last name is not an exemption.
- ☛ Relatives size you up by your looks, your money and your status like anybody else, and they have the download on you.
- ☛ Anybody who let your phone sit silent while you struggled gets the voicemail when you prosper.
- ☛ Don't go where you're not wanted; it costs you your peace, and it can cost you more than that.
- ☛ For the holidays, let somebody bring you a plate and eat it at your own table in peace.
- ☛ Family is whoever shows concern for you when there's nothing in it for them, so hold on to those people.
- ☛ If you have a close-knit family that loves you, cherish it, because a lot of us never got one.



PART THREE



PEOPLE

“Water seeks its own level.”



MY GRANDFATHER



CHAPTER FIVE

CHOOSE THEM WISELY



“A fake friend is worse than a real enemy.”

There was a time I used to daydream about having a crew. A few guys I could go out of town with, maybe rent a cabin up in Anchorage, Alaska, bring some women, get a little drunk and just live. I went out of my way looking for those guys for years. The crew never came. What came instead was the coworker at nineteen who made me change out of my Lacoste before we walked into the club and told me not to tell anybody we hung out, and I was too green to hear that he was ashamed of me.

I had two solid buddies back in the third grade. I lost touch with both of them, and most of the people I called friends after that ended up switching up on me. I grew up as the only kid in my grandparents' house, sheltered, raised in the church and in the suburbs, and I was lonely. I wanted somebody to play with, and that hunger followed me straight through my teens and my twenties. My stepfather used to tell me to be careful who I call friend. My grandmother told me there are more bad

people in this world than good. I heard them, but it didn't register. Certain things you only learn from being out here in the world.

So this is a Life of Hell conversation about friends. Who you let in, who you listen to, who you talk to, and what it costs you when you get it wrong. I got it wrong for a long time. Every so-called buddy I had in my younger days turned into an enemy, and I take accountability for that, because I'm the one who let them in. I'm going to tell you what I've seen so maybe you don't have to learn it the way I did.

FAKE FRIENDS ARE WORSE THAN REAL ENEMIES

Here's the thing about an enemy. With an enemy, you know where you stand. A man who tells you to your face, "I don't care for you and I don't want nothing to do with you," I salute that man. All the cards are on the table. You can move on with your life. There's nothing sinister about that.

A fake friend is a whole different animal. He's around you every day. He calls you, he laughs with you, he tells you he's got your back. And the whole time he can't stand you. Just think about how wicked a person has to be to come into your life, pretend like they like you, and really despise you underneath. That's not weakness on your part for not catching it. That's a person who has mastered the art of deception. Some of these people need to be Oscar nominated in a velvet Giorgio Armani tuxedo. They're that good.

I'm not being dramatic when I say this can cost you your life. A twenty-five-year-old woman from Charlotte went to Mexico in 2022 with people she called friends and came home in a casket. Her travel companions first said she had alcohol poisoning. A video showed one of the women beating her, and Mexico issued an arrest warrant, but U.S. prosecutors declined to bring charges and nobody has been convicted. Think about that. Those were the people she trusted enough to go on

vacation with. The very people that you call friend could be the very people that end up killing you.

Just think about how wicked a person has to be to come into your life, pretend like they like you, and really despise you underneath.

An eighteen-year-old in Florida drowned in a lake while he was out with a friend. Every time I hear a story about a young person who went out and never came home, I say the same thing to whoever is listening. Be careful with who you call friend, because people ain't your friend out here.

Evil hides behind pretty smiles. That's what you always have to remember. Somebody smiling in your face means nothing. People will act like they like you while secretly despising you, and that's the worst thing you can have around you, because the ill feelings lie dormant until the day they don't.

And understand this: people don't become enemies overnight. They've been an enemy. You're just now seeing it. Anybody who turns into the devil has been a devil the whole time. Nobody does you dirty by accident. If a person did you wrong, it wasn't a mistake, it was intentional, and nine times out of ten they had smoke for you from day one. You were just the last to know.

The cowards are the pretenders. If you really got some smoke for a person, why not give it to them face to face? When people don't like you, they'll make up anything about you, because they're not man or woman enough to tell you how they truly feel. I'd rather deal with the honest enemy every time.

YOU BECOME WHO YOU ASSOCIATE WITH

Bad company corrupts good character. I heard that growing up and thought it was just something old folks said. Then I watched the 2026 trial of a twenty-year-old whose own defense said he came from a privileged background, and who was the only defendant the state did not tie to a gang. He was convicted of first-degree murder in a rapper's killing and got life. He lost his whole future because of who he hung around. Trouble is easy to get in and hard to get out of. You can restart that video game. You can't restart real life.

Association leads to assimilation. Whoever you surround yourself with, that's who you're going to become. Whatever you spend your time with, whatever you listen to over and over, whatever you focus on, that's going to get in your spirit. My cousin's dad was so obsessed with Audi that he had one on his iPhone, and a while later he was driving one. Focus works like that, and so does company. The old folks used to say show me your friends and I'll tell you about yourself, and they were right.

I'll tell you my own mistake. I wasn't raised in the hood. I grew up in the suburbs with my grandparents, church every Sunday. But as a teenager I wanted to be accepted so bad that I tried to pass for something I wasn't, and I went looking for guys from a side of life I had never lived. Years later I asked myself why. I wasn't raised in the trenches. You cannot pretend to be a street dude if you don't come from that, and the guys I thought I was fooling saw right through me.

Worse than that, I kept befriending hood-minded guys as a grown man, and those were the friendships that blew up in my face. Around twenty-four I was hanging with one of them, and he laid it out for me plain. He said, "In order for us to be cool, all that classy stuff got to go." The slacks, the way I talk, how I was raised, all of it. Think about what that is. That's not a friend. That's somebody telling you the price of his company is you disappearing. A real friend can agree to disagree with you.

He doesn't need you to become somebody else so he can feel comfortable standing next to you. And ask yourself: would he adjust himself for you? He wasn't about to. So why should I adjust myself for him?

I was green and I didn't cut him off right away. That remark was my cue, and I sat on it. But I did cut him off eventually, and I made a vow to myself: never again. If I got to dress a certain way and act a certain way for you to be cool with me, I'd rather you just not be my friend.

The only rewards in being a street dude are prison or the graveyard. Rap glorifies it, and the in crowd rewards it, but you don't have to adapt to that culture just because of what you look like. It's nothing wrong with being lame. It's nothing wrong with being square. At least you'll be free. I was called lame my whole life and now I embrace it, because I'm thirty-six and I'm not dead and I'm not locked up, and I can't say that for everybody I used to run with.

Know thugs if you must. Don't hang with them. And if somebody shames you for running from your people, let them. At least you won't be dead.

WATER SEEKS ITS OWN LEVEL

My grandfather said this all the time when I was young. Water seeks its own level. I didn't understand it until my thirties. What he meant was that people only want to deal with people who share their life story, their money, their looks, their mind. When somebody sees you don't have their same life story, they cut you off. It's not personal. It's human nature.

If your level of water is ten feet and you're talking to somebody whose level of water is three feet, the two of you can't coincide. If you're living in hell and they're living in heaven, their reality is totally different. A poor man explaining himself to a rich man is wasting his breath. It's hard to understand a person's plight when you've never been in their position, and most people won't even try.

So here is my rule, and I had to learn it the hard way: only befriend people on your level, mentally, spiritually, financially. Same frequency, same desires, same struggles. If you're a man women don't want, don't befriend men with wives and kids. They'll look down on you, and they'll eventually drop you because they're afraid you'll embarrass them in front of their crew. If you don't care about money and the finer things and I do, we have nothing to talk about. You're not on my level mentally. You ain't walking my walk and you ain't talking my talk. So there's no point in us talking.

Find people with your same demons. A drunk understands a drunk. A man who is depressed understands a man who is depressed. That's why addicts hang together, and there's nothing wrong with it. The only person who can truly understand a person with problems is another person with problems. Never talk to people who have been winners their whole life about losing. They can't hear it. They'll tell you to hit the gym or fix your mindset, because they have never once had to live what you live.

Now I'll be honest about the other side of this. Even people with your same demons can turn on you. I've been betrayed by guys in the exact same position as me, men who switched up the minute they thought they were doing a little better. That's like two homeless people fighting each other. At the end of the day you're both homeless. So common ground limits the betrayal, it doesn't erase it. You still stay careful.

In middle school and high school I tried to befriend certain people, and I was never invited into their circles. The popular kids stuck together and shut everybody else out, and those same people are grown now doing the exact same thing in offices and churches and family cookouts. The mindset people had back then never goes away. I used to think I had people fooled. I didn't. People know more than you think they know. They can look at you and get the download in about thirty seconds. So stop trying to pour yourself into a glass that's already full.

DON'T GO OUT OF YOUR WAY TO BE NICE

My biggest downfall in life has been being too nice and too trusting. People have told me that for years. A woman told me at nineteen she wouldn't date me because I was too nice. I didn't understand what she meant. I do now.

Going out of your way, extending your friendship to people, trying to be buddy-buddy with people, you asking for some trouble. People take kindness for weakness. When you're overly friendly, when you're smiling and striking up conversation with everybody, people don't think you're a good person. They think you're slow. They think you're dumb. They think you're a pushover, and they feel like they can have their way with you. I used to really think that being nice meant something. Being nice is not the way to be.

The church did this to me. I was raised to be a man of Jesus. Trust people, forgive people, love your enemy, give everybody the benefit of the doubt. That's a beautiful way to be in a world full of good people. It is a dangerous way to be in a world full of wolves. Christianity made me humble and docile and overly trusting, and that religion had me thinking people love you and people want to see you win. They don't. Just because I have good intentions, that doesn't mean other people do.

My father didn't raise me day to day, and I believe if he had, I never would have been so inviting. He told me a long time ago that you can't go through life just being a man of Jesus the way my mother tried to raise me, that you need a little of the other side in you too. My father is brutally honest. He told me the other day it's better to be mean than it is to be nice, because nice people get seen as soft. He gave me *The 48 Laws of Power* for my birthday back in 2016 because he wanted me to understand how people really operate. One line in that book, which Greene borrows from Machiavelli, stuck with me: a man who is good all the time amongst the many who are not good will soon come to ruin. That was me.

Now, my father says mean. I say neutral. Don't be a jerk to people, but don't go out of your way being all nice and friendly either. Be cordial. Speak, do your job, keep it moving. Don't force friendships. If something is meant to be, then it's going to be. If you meet people who share your energy and your interests and you click, fine. But don't be desperate for friendship, and don't be the one chasing. When you extend yourself to a person more than they're extending themselves to you, they think you're slow and they think you're dumb.

If I had kids, I'd teach them this before they became teenagers. The world does not love you. Be neutral with people. Street guys learn that early from life. Suburban church kids like me learn it in their thirties with a lot of scars.

CONSIDER THE SOURCE

My father's rule, and his buddy's rule, and now mine: consider the source. Whoever you listen to and whoever you take advice and instruction from, that's who you're going to end up like. If you listen to a dummy you'll be a dummy. If you listen to a smart person you'll be smart. Listening to the wrong people had me jacked up for real in my younger days. I thought they were leading me to the promised land. They were really leading me to Hades.

Everybody is not worth listening to. Somebody in a financial deficit cannot tell you how to become financially competent. Somebody who doesn't have what you desire cannot tell you how to get it. Somebody who hasn't traveled your road isn't qualified to tell you where it goes. All advice is not good advice. Some advice is to destroy you. Some people want to see you fail, and they'll hand you a map straight to the ditch with a smile on their face.

So ask for receipts. My father told me, "Anything I tell you, son, I can back it up." Everything he ever told me, he could cash. That's why he and my grandparents are the only people I have ever truly listened to.

Everybody else, I'm selective. People said I never listened. It's not the fact that I never listen. It's just that I'm selective of who I choose to listen to. Deception is lies mixed with a little bit of truth, and the most deceived person is the one being sold a lie who doesn't know it. Read between the lines.

The other half of this is who you talk to. Talking about my challenges with other men was one of the worst decisions of my life. People don't care about your problems. That's rule of thumb number one. My father told me that all my life. Men who never struggled with women would get irritated, tell me I had no mouthpiece, write me off, and in some cases take what I told them and use it against me later. People fear what they don't understand, and they ridicule what they fear.

So keep your problems to yourself unless the person listening has lived your same dilemma. Never cast your pearls before swine. And never, ever tell people your dreams and aspirations. The people who act like they want you to win are sometimes praying on your downfall. Some people would rather see you six feet under than at the top. When you run your mouth, you give them the download and the upper hand. The less people know about you, the better. Mind your business, keep your mouth closed, and you'll be fine.

VIBES DON'T LIE

If there is one gift I have now that I did not have at fifteen or twenty-four, it's this. I can read people. Energy does not lie. Have you ever been around somebody and the vibe just felt off? It's not all in your head. It ain't right. That eerie feeling is your inner self speaking to you. Your intuition will never lie to you. The little voice in your head, that's God talking to you, trying to save you.

I learned what it costs to miss that early. I was thirteen years old, taking out the garbage, doing a chore like any other day, and I got busted in the face. I've gone back over that day more times than I can count. If I

had been able to read people's energy back then the way I can now, I never would have gotten hurt.

And it didn't stop at thirteen. In my teens and my twenties I got those feelings all the time and I ignored them. I thought people were just playing when they said something foul to me. I gave the benefit of the doubt. Giving people the benefit of the doubt is the worst habit I ever had, and it will get you eliminated out here. In some cases it will get you killed. Many people in prison or in the ground would be free or alive if they'd listened to that little voice.

Not long ago I spent a whole day with my father, and he was schooling me on exactly this. So here's how I move now. If a wolf show you his teeth the first time, don't second guess that wolf. Believe that wolf. Next time he isn't going to just show you his teeth, he's going to bite you down. If a person shows you one red flag, there are two, three, four, five more coming behind it. One chance. No second chances to burn me. I used to be the forgiving type and that programming got me walked over. Forgiveness is for the church. I draw the line.

And stop playing Doctor Phil with wicked people. I used to sit around trying to figure out why somebody treated me the way they did, what I did wrong, how I could fix it. Ain't no need to try to figure out why a snake is a snake. You just know a snake is a snake and you need to get rid of that snake. The goal is not to understand the nature of the beast. The goal is to get the beast away from you. That same wicked person is not spending one minute trying to understand you.

Ain't no need to try to figure out why a snake is a snake.

Don't let anybody gaslight you out of what you felt either. When you tell somebody the energy was off and they say you're crazy, you're

paranoid, you're negative, that is a manipulation tactic. Being skeptical after you've been burned is not paranoia. It's a defense mechanism, it's self-preservation, and self-preservation comes before anything. When something doesn't feel right, nine times out of ten you're right. Trust your judgment. Stand on it.

GIVE PEOPLE WHAT THEY GIVE YOU

My grandmother's rule was simple: you give people what they give you. It took me until my thirties to live it. Same energy back, nothing extra.

I did the opposite for years, down to an Hermès cereal bowl for a relative who never picked up the phone to see how I was doing. That's not generosity. That's a man begging to be liked. And the people I was begging didn't like me. Some of them wouldn't care if I died. When you show love to people who despise you, they don't soften up. They think, don't this idiot see I don't want nothing to do with him? And they respect you less.

So test loyalty the simple way. Fall back. Stop calling and see who calls you. I learned this one through trial and error, because I used to be the one calling people on the regular, and the energy never came back. A real friend doesn't call every day, but he stays in contact over the years. If you find yourself always reaching out and they never reach out to you, they've proven they're not loyal. Anybody can say they got your back. Ask yourself when the last time was that they called you.

People are like the weather. They will switch up on you at the drop of a dime. A friend today is an enemy tomorrow. So when somebody drops you, don't chase them. They're doing you a favor. Growing away from people is God's way of eliminating demons out of your life. If a person is meant to be in your world, they're going to stay in your world. I've got one buddy I've been talking to since 2017. He's proven his loyalty over

the years, and he's still my friend. Everybody else came and went, and I don't miss them.

Which brings me to where I landed. At thirty-six, I don't want friends. I say it plain because people act like it's a tragedy. It's not. I'm learning to enjoy my own company, and I have more peace now than I had in all those years of chasing people. I'm cordial with everybody. Strangers talk to me all the time. I just don't let anybody in without a reason.

If I meet somebody genuine along the way, somebody wired like me who loves cologne and the finer things and rocks with me, I'll hold on to that person, because real is rare and fake is everywhere. But I'm not going looking. Lonely is a price I'll pay before I sit around people who don't mean me no good.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ A fake friend is worse than a real enemy, because at least the enemy tells you where you stand.
- ☛ People don't turn into enemies overnight; they were enemies all along, and you just found out.
- ☛ Anybody who needs you to change how you dress and how you talk before he'll call you a friend is not your friend.
- ☛ Befriend people on your level who carry your same demons, and stop pouring yourself into glasses that are already full.
- ☛ Don't go out of your way to be nice; neutral and cordial will keep you safer than friendly ever did.
- ☛ Consider the source, and take instruction only from people who can back up what they say.
- ☛ Keep your problems, your dreams and your business to yourself unless the listener has lived your same dilemma.
- ☛ One red flag means more are coming, so don't hand anybody a second chance to burn you.
- ☛ Fall back and stop calling for a while; the ones who call you are the ones worth keeping.
- ☛ It might get lonely being alone, but one solid buddy and your own company beat a crowd of pretenders.

*“Anyone who cut you out of their life, they
never was your friend.”*



B A R A K A



CHAPTER SIX

BETTER TO BE ALONE THAN IN BAD COMPANY



*“It might get lonely being alone, but it’s better to be alone
than to be in bad company.”*

You already know about the cashmere sweater I wore to the family barbecue, and how everybody at that cookout read me like a book anyway.

Now I’m thirty-six, going on thirty-seven, and I don’t go to the barbecue. I don’t go to Thanksgiving. I tell my father to bring me a plate. I’ve been hurt so much in my life, been betrayed so much in my life, to where I done cut the world off. I’m allergic to people now. The older I get, the more honestly I can say it: I’m allergic to human beings.

Some of you hear that and think it’s sad. In this chapter I’m going to tell you why it’s one of the best moves I ever made, how I got here, and what being alone gave me. And I’m also going to be honest with you about the part nobody wants to say out loud, because I don’t do coping. I tell you what I’ve seen.

NOBODY IS INTROVERTED BY CHOICE

Let me start with something people get wrong. They look at a man who keeps to himself and they say he's an introvert, like he was born that way, like it's a personality type off a quiz. No. People are not introverted by choice. Anyone who likes to stay to themselves and isolate, those are people who've had a lot of bad experiences, and it killed their spirit. Antisocial people are not born, they're created.

The outgoing people you know had good experiences with people, so they keep going back for more. The quiet man had a different set of experiences, and he's responding to them the way anybody with sense would. If you want to know why a person is the way he is, find out what he's been through before you judge him.

I was raised in church, and church teaches you to be friendly. Love everybody, give everybody the benefit of the doubt, assume the person walking up to you has a good heart. So that's what I did. In my teens and my twenties I was Mr. Friendly. I'd strike up a conversation with a random stranger. I'd go out of my way to befriend anybody. I called relatives who never called me. I gave gifts to people who never once called to ask how I was doing. You already heard about the crew I used to daydream about; it never showed up, and every group I tried to join after that didn't really want me in it.

What did all that friendliness get me? It got me betrayed. It got me mistreated. When you're overly nice to people and overextending yourself, people think you're dumb and slow anyway. I thought I was building connections. I didn't even realize what I was doing back then. I told people my goals, my plans, my business, because I was desperate for friends, and every piece of it was something they could use later. Only looking back can I see it.

Here's the thing I wish somebody had told me then. Everybody cannot be outgoing, because people have to be receptive to you as a

person in order for you to be outgoing. You got to have the green light to be outgoing. The people who get that green light are the good-looking ones, the ones with money, the ones with clout. They'll never admit that's where their confidence comes from. They'll tell you to believe in yourself. But if people aren't receptive to you, no amount of social skills is going to change the reception. So if you tried, and it didn't work, pat yourself on the back that you tried. Then stop trying. My father put it simply: people tell you things from their own perspective. The man who always got the green light is describing his life, not yours.

WOLVES HIDE IN THAT SHEEP CLOTHING

Now let me tell you why bad company is worse than no company. It's not just that it feels bad. It can end you.

Evil hides behind a smile. Wolves hide in that sheep clothing. The person who shakes your hand and laughs at your jokes could be the same person who despises you and is waiting on the right moment. I'm not being dramatic. Being solo can save your life. Being around a lot of people can end your life.

I learned it the hard way, and I got lucky. Being Mr. Friendly in my younger days put me in situations where something really bad could have happened to me. I feel fortunate I didn't get my head cracked. A buddy told me years ago that being too nice can get you erased off the map. I thought he was exaggerating. He wasn't. Everybody I ever befriended, the skating buddies included, turned out to be somebody I had to cut off. The fake friend in my twenties who lectured me about how I dress. Another so-called friend who spent our whole friendship trying to crap on me. Looking back, most of them were secretly ashamed to be seen with me, and not one of them had the nerve to say it to my face.

You turn into the people you run with, and where I came up, that could mean prison. The dudes who ran with the wrong crew either caught a charge or caught a bullet. And here's what nobody told me

when I was young and desperate for a crew: you can't argue by yourself. You can't get into confrontation by yourself. Nobody ever went to prison for a fight he had alone in his apartment. Being alone keeps you out of trouble, keeps you out of the cell, keeps you above ground.

My father put me on to Sun Tzu's Art of War, which is about defeating an enemy without force. The best way I know to defeat an enemy without force is to never let him close enough to become one. Take your time knowing a person's mind and their energy before they get into your personal space. It's easier to find bad company than good company, so the burden of proof is on them, not on you.

ISOLATION IS THE BEST MEDICATION

People ask me how I deal with betrayal. The best way to deal with betrayal is to not deal with nobody. Stay to yourself, mind your own business, and do what makes you happy. Isolation is the best medication for people who've been done wrong in life. If you don't deal with people, you never have to worry about getting betrayed, stepped on, or hurt. You could never hurt yourself and you could never disappoint yourself, so it's best to be alone.

The deepest cut came from closest to home. People in my corner told me for years to stop going around my relatives, and I thought they were being sarcastic. I held on to the idea that my family loved me anyway. I already told you in the family chapter how that turned out. What I'll add here is what it did to me. When you realize you don't have nobody in this world, that's a rude awakening. When you realize you don't even have family, you truly know you're all alone. And once you know that, you stop wasting your energy trying to be let in.

*The best way to deal with betrayal is to not deal with
nobody.*

Some of you think that's bitter. I think it's math. Life is already a life of hell without adding other people's negativity to your challenges. Every person you deal with brings in their own energy, their own frequency, their own brain function, and you don't know what's in there. A person can look normal on the outside and be dealing with something serious on the inside. Watch the news. A man snaps in a Walmart. A woman gets stabbed on the train for nothing. People are on demon time, and you don't even have to do anything wrong. One wrong look, read the wrong way, can be enough.

It's colder out there than it used to be, too. Now I walk through a store and feel like I'm on my own little planet. Everybody is stressed about money, worn down, locked in their own world. This is a perfect day and age to be antisocial.

So I protect my peace. Your peace, your solitude, comes before anything. If it costs you your peace, you don't need it. That applies to a friend, a relative, a woman, and a job. At the nine to five, go to work and go home. Co-workers are not your friend, and I wish I would have known that back in my younger days. Be cordial, do your job, and get on. Some days at work I wish I had a remote job so I could sit in a coffee shop by myself and never have to feel the energy in that building again. There are men serving life who will never eat a good fettuccine again because they let somebody at work take them out of character.

The tool that makes all of this work is reading energy. In my teens and twenties I ran my mouth, tried to be buddy-buddy with everybody, and didn't trust my own judgment. At thirty-six I sit back, I listen, I observe, and I trust what I feel. When it says walk, I walk.

I'm not rude about it. Strangers still talk to me, like the lady in the store who prayed with me. I'm cordial with everybody, because I don't know who's about to snap, and I don't want to be the reason. But cordial is where it ends. I stay neutral, not rude and not overly outgoing, so people can't read me. When I was riding public transit, I'd sleep or put my music on and not talk to or look at anybody. If somebody wants to get close, I'm asking one question: why? Nobody is around you just for the hell of it. Everybody has a motive, and in this age of fakery where everyone is wearing a mask, your gut is the only lie detector you've got.

WHEN YOU'RE ALONE, YOU CAN GET YOURSELF TOGETHER

Here's the part people skip over when they talk about loneliness. Being alone is not just protection. Being alone is productive.

When you alone, you can get yourself together. Being around people is a distraction, guys. Being around people is definitely a distraction. When you have nobody pulling at you, nobody to go out with, nobody calling, your conscience is the most active it's ever going to be. You can sit by yourself and plan like it's a chess game. This move, then this move, then this move. People, including relatives, are a hindrance to what you're trying to accomplish. I wish I'd known that when I was young.

I'm living it right now. I'm in automotive class every day. I passed all fifteen modules of the pollution course and got the certificate. I'm learning to take starters apart. I'm getting that money so I can get my own place. I've even looked into renting an RV, after my dad's buddy told me about it, because rent out here is its own kind of hell. When I get my own place, I'm going to be in my own domain, and I'm not going to deal with anybody, not even family. If I was a rich man I'd be on an island all by myself. That's not a threat. That's the plan.

My father keeps having the same talk with me: money is everything, and if I don't get my finances together I'll end up on the street. He's not

trying to scare me. He's telling me what happens to a man when nobody shows up. My drive comes from knowing that nobody is coming to save me. Nobody is going to come rescue you. You got to figure this thing called life out on your own, so you might as well put all your energy into you.

My father drilled this into me: do what's best for me, because everybody else is doing what's best for them. The only person that you should want to please at the end of the day is yourself. I used to be big on pleasing people, pleasing family, worrying about what everybody thought. If you're living your life trying to please other people, you're going to forever be miserable. I got out of that. I got to do what makes me happy. I got to do what makes Savvy Guy happy. If lying in the bed on your off day makes you happy, lie in the bed.

I'll be honest about what my focus is. I don't want no friends. All I want is some money. And when the money comes, I'm not going to stop being vigilant, because certain people will have their hands out. If you wasn't around me while I was trying to get myself together, don't try to be around me when I get myself together.

FIND YOUR OWN KIND

Now, I'm not telling you to never speak to another human being. I'm telling you to be careful about which ones.

Don't explain your sorrow to people. Don't explain the hell and the misfortune you've been through to somebody who's never had a bad day with women, money or family. If a person never walked a mile in your shoes, they could never fathom what you're going through, and most of them won't try. They'll tell you it's your mindset, your attitude, your swag, and write you off. If I'm going to be friends with anybody, you got to have my same problems.

I'll go further. I don't want to be around happy people. I like being around people who are miserable, who are down and out, who've been

through it. I like loser energy, and I say that with love, because that's what I am. I can't relate to a man who's had good experiences with people his whole life. We don't speak the same language. The man who's had the same hell as me, that's the one I'll sit with.

That's the whole reason I dream about a Life of Hell lounge, a spot for pathetic lonely men to shoot pool, eat tacos, sip a little cognac on velvet couches and talk about problems. Some days I picture a studio and a podcast, me in an Ermenegildo Zegna suit with a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, interviewing men who've been ostracized their whole lives. I've joked about a fraternity called No Alpha, with Greek letters on the jackets and T-shirts, bowling nights, golf, skating, camping, martial arts classes like the ones I took as a kid, even trips to Colombia and Nicaragua. A brotherhood for the forgotten men, the unchosen ones. I'm half joking. The other half is serious, because the only people who ever understood me were men in my position.

My friend Baraka was one. We started talking in 2011, back in the early online days, and I loved talking to that man for years. He was smart, and he told me something I've never let go of: "Anyone who cut you out of their life, they never was your friend." He was right. Every time somebody drops me now, I hear him saying it, and I let them go. He's gone now, and I think about him a lot.

But be careful even there. Just because somebody may be in the same position as you don't mean you can totally trust him. So even with your own kind, test the waters. Vibes don't lie. If you click, cool. If you don't, don't force it.

ALONE IS NOT THE SAME AS HIDING

I want to be clear about something, because some of you are going to take this chapter and go sit in a basement with the lights off. That's not it. Even if you're a dude in a position like this, you still got to live your life. You can't just be a hermit and confine yourself to a basement. Sitting

around all day moping that you don't have a wife is not going to make things better. I had to learn that the hard way myself.

Being alone as a grown man means doing it solo. Go bowling by yourself. Go golfing, skating, swimming, to the movies by yourself. Get an ice cream cone by yourself. Get a Cava bowl by yourself. Go to an Italian or a Spanish restaurant and order what you want. Go to a hotel and dance. Take a walk. Take a cruise by yourself. There is nothing wrong with it, and anybody who tells you it's sad is somebody who's never had to.

*Even if you're a dude in a position like this, you still
got to live your life.*

The holidays are the hardest part, and I won't lie to you about that. Summertime, with the graduations and the couples out in the sun, is pure torture for certain guys. It's beautiful and sunny outside, and it's completely dark in some people's lives. On Valentine's Day I've cried, and I've drunk until I threw up. Christmas comes and it's a reminder that you're not loved, and the commercials rub it in. Through the fake smiles people are hurting inside. Through the laughter people are crying inside. So on those days I hide out, I get my plate, I find something liberating to do, and I wait for the calendar to move. At Thanksgiving, if my father wants to link up, I'll see him. Everybody else gets my silence, and I eat in peace.

And now the honest part, because I promised it. Any dude that say they okay with being single forever and never having companionship, they playing themselves. That's a coping mechanism. That's all that is: cope. No man in his right mind wants to be alone forever. No one wants to truly be alone. People who claim they're totally at peace alone are lying, and I'm including the version of me that says it on a good day. A man

wants a wife for intimacy, companionship and help with the bills, and I'll break all three of those down when we get to love.

One night I was at a wine bar with wine on tap, eating a charcuterie board, and every table around me was a couple. I sat there thinking about something my father told me years ago: we are not all equal. Not everybody has what it takes to get what those people had. I believe that. I'd still take a wife. I'd take her to that wine bar. I'm not above it, and if you're honest, neither are you.

So here's where I actually stand. I'm not looking for friends, and I'm not forcing anything. Good energy is very rare nowadays, and when you come across someone with it, that's a person you want to hold on to. If you meet a person that don't got the devil in them, you got lucky. Hold on to the one. And whatever you're carrying, don't carry it in silence. My father told me even a grown man needs somebody to get things off his chest to. Vent to somebody you trust, or make your own content, or write it down, because keeping all of it buried inside is how men snap. Being alone is where I found my peace. It's not where I found everything. It's going to take a while for you to get there. It took a while for me to get there. But you live and you learn.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ Nobody is introverted by choice; if you pulled back from people, it's because people gave you a reason.
- ☛ You can't argue by yourself, and nobody ever caught a charge over a fight he had alone in his apartment.
- ☛ Isolation is the best medication for a man who's been done wrong.
- ☛ When the vibe is off, it's off, and you don't owe anybody the benefit of the doubt.
- ☛ Use the quiet to plan your moves like a chess game, and stop living to please people who aren't living to please you.
- ☛ If you're going to have a circle at all, build it out of men who know your kind of hell, and still test the waters.
- ☛ Alone is not the same as hiding, so bowl, skate, swim and eat out by yourself, and let nobody call it sad.
- ☛ Any man who says he's fine being alone forever is coping, so be honest about what you want even while you protect your peace.
- ☛ If you find one person without the devil in them, you got lucky, so hold on to them.



PART FOUR



MONEY

*“If it ain’t got nothing to do with
finances, it don’t mean nothing.”*



MY FATHER



CHAPTER SEVEN

MONEY IS EVERYTHING



“My father told me: see if you have no money, and see what you have. With no money, you’re not gonna have nothing.”

I was sitting under a gazebo on the Fourth of July, thirty-six years old, thinking about something my father has been telling me since I was a kid. Money is everything. He said it when I was fourteen. He said it in my twenties when I didn’t want to hear it. He says it every single time we get on the phone now, and we talk about money every time we talk. My father is an electrician in DC, union, making about \$3,000 a week, and I have never once caught that man in a lie. Everything he ever told me, he can prove.

For the longest time I wanted to stay humble about it. I grew up in church, and we were taught that the love of money is the root of all evil. So I would say the humble thing. Money isn’t everything. There’s more to life. I wanted to believe that so bad. Then I started looking at what was actually happening in my life and in the lives of the people around me. And I did one more thing. I looked at the financial situation of the people telling me money isn’t everything. That was the day it clicked.

So here's where I landed, and I'm telling you this as a man who has worked two jobs most of his adult life. I've worked produce, run a register and stocked shelves overnight at a grocery store. I've prepped food and washed dishes in a restaurant kitchen. I've sat in an office. I cook in a hotel kitchen now while I finish an automotive program in my mid-thirties. Money will not fix every problem. Rich people have problems too. But money is the one thing in this hell realm that moves the needle on almost everything else. It is the one thing that truly motivates me. And it is the one thing almost nobody will admit they want.

IF IT AIN'T GOT NOTHING TO DO WITH FINANCES, IT DON'T MEAN NOTHING

That line is my father's. "If it ain't got nothing to do with finances, it don't mean nothing." He drilled it into me the way other parents drill in Bible verses, and I give him credit for every jewel he dropped on me. My mother tried to get me to focus on the spiritual side of things, no shade to my mom. But spiritual things won't feed you. When your stomach is growling, you better have some finances, because when you get to that store you better have some cash to pay for that meal or you finna starve. Nobody at the register is going to take your good heart as payment.

Being dead broke is the root of all evil. Not money. I'll co-sign Rick Ross on that one all day. Being broke is what makes people snap at strangers, what makes people sell their soul, what makes grown men self-medicate with cognac after a shift. When I see people angry and on edge everywhere I go, I don't see bad people. I see people whose finances are not together, and the stress is leaking out of them.

Here's the part I had to grow into. In my adolescence and my twenties it was all about women. At thirty-six, my focus shifted. I'm not chasing the same things I chased when I was twenty-five, because I finally understood something about my own lane. I was never the ladies' man. I have known since I was a teenager that whatever I got in this life, I was

going to have to have something to get it. My father put it plainly: some men get chosen, and some men have to pay their way in. That hurt when I was young. Now it's just information, and information is what you build a plan on.

Money has a way of compensating for what you lack, just how looks compensate for certain people. That's what people mean when they call money the great equalizer. Let me be clear about what it can and cannot do, because I learned this the hard way. You cannot buy attraction. If the initial chemistry is not there, then you cannot buy it. But the beautiful thing about money is that it will at least make a woman tolerate you, and it will make a whole lot of other people tolerate you too. It makes people overlook your flaws. It opens doors that stay shut for a man with nothing.

They say it's lonely at the top. No, it's not. When you're at the top, people want to be around you. When you're messed up in life, nobody comes around. My father stressed that to me over and over, and I've watched it play out. So when I say money is the one thing that motivates me, that's what I mean. I'm not a man who gets celebrated for walking in a room. I'm a man who has to bring something to the table, and money is the thing I can actually go get.

AN AVERAGE SALARY USED TO BE GOOD

My father and my uncle were raised middle class. My grandparents were middle class. For a long time that's all I ever wanted. I used to tell myself, I don't need to be rich, I just want to be middle class like my people. And then I watched that whole category disappear. Middle class used to be good enough. Not anymore. There's either the wealthy or the poor now, the haves and the have-nots, and there isn't anything in between.

Back in the day being a thousandaire was good enough. A man with a trade could marry, buy a house, raise a family and take a vacation. The older men with wives and grandkids came up in that era. My

grandparents came up in that era. Now, if you tell a woman you're a mechanic, in my experience that's laughable. A plumber, an electrician, a man making \$70,000 a year, these are people being looked down on. I saw a woman on a livestream offended because a man sent her \$30 for lunch. She wanted a full-course meal, two drinks and dessert. A regular career is no longer impressive, and I'm not saying that to shame anybody with a regular career. I'm saying it because you need to know what you're up against.

Inflation plays a part, and the inflation is real. When I was a little boy a haircut was \$8. Now it's \$30. Groceries are sky high. One-bedroom apartments in ordinary areas run \$1,700, \$1,800, and landlords want you to make three times the rent for a place you will never own. This is how you know it's bad out here: when a one-bedroom apartment costs the same as a mortgage. Guys in my automotive class work the automotive job and a second job just to have their own place. A man told me he works three jobs to pay \$1,875 a month for his one-bedroom. Life itself is expensive. It's expensive to breathe. It's expensive to just walk around.

Then you've got the older generation calling the younger generation lazy. They don't understand how lucky they were. Climbing the ladder was easier when things were cheaper, and they'd like to forget that. Don't let these older people try to shame you and make you seem like you're unmotivated and sorry because you don't have it all together. You'd need \$100,000 to \$200,000 a year to be truly comfortable in 2026, and most people make nowhere near that. That's not a motivation problem. That's math.

This is how you know it's bad out here: when a one-bedroom apartment costs the same as a mortgage.

And nobody up top is coming to fix it. My grandmother always told me wealthy people don't care about common people, because they never feel the stress common people feel. I used to think she was being harsh. Then I watched the president say on camera, "I love the inflation." I watched them cut food stamps. The way I see it, the elites sign bills with Mont Blanc pens in Canali suits and go play golf. They don't care about the working class. They don't care if we perish.

Not long ago I passed a person sleeping on the sidewalk under a blanket, and the first thing in my head was my father's voice. From the time my brother and I were young he told us, "Y'all going to be under a bridge" if we didn't handle our business. He still says the bridge is always a decision away. I used to think that was him being hard on us. Now I think it's the most loving thing a man ever told me, because it was true. Once you accept that nobody is coming, you stop waiting on somebody to save you and you start building your own way out.

HARD WORK ALONE DOESN'T CUT IT

I was raised to believe that if you work hard, you win. I'm here to tell you that's only half the story. You can bust your behind as hard as you want to and life will continue to pummel your behind. Hard work is necessary, but it isn't enough on its own, and the folks who made it rarely admit that. They'll make it sound like all they did was grind. It wasn't just the grind. They had the odds in their favor.

Look at who actually makes it. Singers who can't sing got signed because of who their parents were or who they knew. Kids born to money get the blueprint from day one and can be dim as a doorknob and still flourish. My father told me years ago, "A lot of these people had luck on their side. They couldn't even do it again if they tried." He told me something harsher too: "You born with a curse if you ain't born rich." Without skill set and without talent and without having the right

connections, you could work as hard as you want to and you'll just be running in place.

I've seen the head start up close, in my own family. My grandmother, my father's mother, grew up with money, because her father played in the baseball league. She and her sister had a privileged life, the kind of childhood I only saw on television. I'm not mad at her for it. I'm just telling you that where you start is luck, and nobody picks their starting line. When somebody tells you the only reason you're not where you want to be is that you don't want it bad enough, that's gaslighting. I have always worked, a lot of the time two jobs at once. I have never been lazy. And life has knocked me back down more times than I can count anyway.

Now here's the other side of the same coin, because I'm not giving anybody an excuse. You can bust your behind your whole life, you'll be in a comfortable financial position, but you won't be a millionaire. That's a true statement, and it's not a sad one. Most people are not going to be multi-millionaires, but who cares? Comfortable is a real goal. A decent salary, bills paid, a nice vehicle, a home, a vacation every so often. My father taught me that a man only goes as far as his abilities carry him, so set goals within reason and don't set the bar so high you can't reach it.

Let me tell you what hard work actually looks like, because I watched it. In 2003 I was fourteen and living with my father, and he was thirty-five and joining the electricians' union as an apprentice. He had come out of Savannah State planning to be a teacher. Instead he was starting over at the bottom of a trade in his mid-thirties, and early on, as an apprentice, he got electrocuted. He did not quit. He went back to work. Twenty-some years later he's a master electrician with the IBEW, traveling the country and making real money. We see the end result. We didn't see the blood, sweat, and tears.

My grandfather told me when I was seven that nobody is going to give you anything, and he kept telling me in other words as I got older. He told me anything worth having won't come easy. The old man was right

about all of it. If you continue to quit, you'll never see the possibilities of what could have been.

KEEP YOUR OCCUPATION UNTIL THE CONTENT TAKES OFF

I wasted my twenties. I went to a couple of colleges for a general studies associate's degree and brushed off every word my father said about learning a trade. Then in 2022 my Chevrolet Aveo died on me and I had no money to fix it. So I started reading up on the trouble codes myself, trying to figure out what was wrong with my own car, and that is what finally pushed me into an automotive technology program at a technical college. I enrolled at thirty-five, the exact age my father was when he joined the union. Cars will always need human hands. Everybody is not college material, but I will say this: get a skill. With this inflation you need a skill to survive.

But understand what a job is. That occupation, that career you're working, it's just going to get you by. That's all it's going to do. As long as you're working for someone, they're going to pay you what they feel you're worth. These corporations don't care about you. You're a number to them, and the CEO is eating pasta on the golf course while you sweat. So I'm not telling you to quit your job. I'm telling you to see it for what it is. Work your nine to five, but while you're working it, be coming up with some way to free yourself financially. Do what you got to do until you can do what you truly want to do.

That rule applies to this channel too. My first video went up when I was nineteen, long before content could earn a dime. The content never paid my rent. The grocery store paid my rent. The kitchen paid my rent. Now I see content creators begging online for rent money, and that's just the new version of begging on the street. The way I see it, for every Kai Cenat there are a million people who quit a job for a dream and ended up roommating in their thirties. Don't let these content creators deceive you

into quitting your regular occupation. Keep your regular occupation until the content takes off. If this podcast ever takes off, the automotive work becomes my side hustle. Until then, the automotive work is the meal ticket.

My mother, to her credit, talked to me about entrepreneurship the whole time I was growing up. Empowerment, having my own business, being my own boss. She always told me working for someone isn't the answer forever. She was right about that, and I give her her flowers for it. My real venture is a suit business. It started with neckties. I picked out nature-themed fabric, had a seamstress make the ties, and listed them on Mercari for \$60 apiece. The seamstress even offered to make me bow ties for free. Fabric and manufacturing are expensive and the capital isn't there yet, but the plan is a full suit line. One day I want the store in Buckhead. I also picture a real studio for this show, marble floors, a piano in the corner, me in a Zegna suit, guests who've been through hell too.

Rome wasn't built overnight. Denzel said without commitment you'll never start, without consistency you'll never finish, and this is the most consistent I've ever been at anything. People can say whatever they want about me, but one thing they can't say is that I got lazy.

REAL MONEY IS QUIET

Where I come from, nobody taught kids about money. We got spiritual advice. Other communities teach their children about stocks and investing and hand them connections, and some of those kids are set by eighteen. I'm not bitter about it, but I'll say it plain: your parents are your first teachers, and if they're not putting you in a position to win, they're doing you a disservice. So in my thirties I'm doing what nobody showed me at ten, and doing it instead of praying for it, the way Dominique tried to tell me back in my twenties.

I started small, and I mean small. A few dollars each in Amazon, Motorola and Tesla, \$1 in Bitcoin, then \$90 in Rivian when it was around

\$16 a share. The goal is \$100 in each, then a full share, then more. I invest in things I like and things that are the wave of the future. What if I had started investing in stocks back when I was twenty? By thirty-five I could be a millionaire in Pacoima somewhere. I can't get that time back. Better late than never.

My dad's buddy, a man I still call for financial advice, told me, "All you need is five properties bringing in residual income, and you can live anywhere you want." Another man said it to me even simpler: once you get you some assets, you'll have everything you ever wanted. You don't have to be a millionaire. You need things that make money while you sleep, because you can't work forever. Your body won't let you work forever. A career is a vehicle. You use the income to buy the assets, and the assets eventually free you.

That's also why I stopped being impressed by designer. Adam Sandler is reportedly worth hundreds of millions of dollars, Forbes named him the highest-paid actor of 2025, and he dresses like he shops at Walmart. From what I can see, Tim Cook and Warren Buffett wear expensive clothes that don't scream anything. Real money is quiet, loose change makes a lot of noise. My cousin paid \$1,600 for a Dior T-shirt. I went on Dior's website afterward because I didn't even know Dior made a T-shirt that cost that much. The rappers he's copying get their clothes for free, so he's paying for what the stars aren't paying for.

I'm not preaching from a mountaintop. As a kid I watched Jermaine Dupri open a refrigerator full of Cristal on Cribs, and rap videos planted that seed in me deep. I got caught up in designer more than I like to admit. But a lot of what we chase is made for next to nothing and stamped with a name. They're finessing the poor. I believe designer was created so people with nothing could feel like somebody, and I say that as a man who loves a Zegna suit more than almost anything. Wealthy people accumulate assets, not liabilities.

Real money is quiet, loose change makes a lot of noise.

LIVE WITHIN YOUR MEANS, BUT STILL TREAT
YOURSELF

Here's the rule, and it has two halves. Don't put yourself in a financial jam. A thirty-five-year-old told me he pays a \$5,600 mortgage in Alpharetta to flex and he can't afford it. A forty-two-year-old brother told me he's living in his brand new Mercedes GLE. You can be riding around in an Alfa Romeo Tonale but broke, sleeping in that SUV. My father told me not to be impressed by the nice things I see people with, because all of that is bills. They're showing you what they have to bust their behind six and seven days a week to maintain.

So don't buy the \$3,000 suit when rent is due. Don't buy the Jordans before the mortgage. If you can't afford it, you just can't afford it. It is what it is. I love Zegna and Creed and Baccarat Rouge and I will never put myself in financial jeopardy for any of it. Years ago I had to say something to myself that I'll pass to you. It's okay with Target. It's okay with Walmart. I had to tell myself, it's okay with Walmart. You ain't trying to impress nobody. I've sat in front of the camera in a Target jacket and looked just fine, and you definitely don't want to end up sleeping in a car in an Armani suit with Creed on.

Now the other half, and I feel this one just as strongly. Who in their right mind wants to work just to pay bills? That's not living, that's existing. Work, eat, sleep, repeat. Hobbies are for rich people, when you really think about it, and the common person, my grandmother's phrase, doesn't get time for them. If all you do is work, you're in prison. What's

the purpose of grinding and dedicating yourself and busting your behind if you can't have anything that you want?

Who really wants to live within their means when everything is so sky high? It's expensive to just walk outside. "Live within your means" was a saying for when life was affordable. So treat yourself. Not every day. At Christmas, on your birthday, after a seventy-hour week at the shop. Buy the \$500 bottle of champagne. Eat the black truffle risotto. Go to Ruth's Chris. If you bust your behind like a dog, you've got to have something to show for it, or you will lose your mind.

I said this exact thing to my dad's buddy just the other day. I'm about to be working seventy and eighty hours a week at an auto shop, and I told him straight: if you're putting in those kinds of hours, you've got to treat yourself to something. Young people will be lucky to get an apartment, let alone a house, so what are we supposed to be saving all our joy for? A guy once told me he saves up just so he can go make it rain at the strip club every now and then. That's not my thing, but I understood him completely. Me, I want a \$649 bottle of champagne and a steakhouse date. Whatever yours is, find it, and don't feel guilty about it. I used to feel guilty. I don't anymore.

YOUR FINANCIAL POSITION DETERMINES WHO YOU'RE AROUND

My grandmother was the main one warning me off urban environments when I was coming up. My father clarified it for me as I got older. It's not about the neighborhood. Your financial position determines what you're subjected to. Your financial position will determine who you're around. If you're not in a good financial position, you're going to find yourself in Ninjaville around head-busters and dome-checkers. Goons can't afford nice areas. I like being in places where people wonder what a brother is doing there, and the only passport into those places is money.

That danger is motivation by itself. So is everything else. Money will fix ninety percent of your problems, and at least with money you can be to yourself. You don't have to be around anybody you don't want to be around. You don't have to tolerate a supervisor who talks to you crazy, because you don't need the job. That's not flash. That's freedom.

I'll warn you about what money shows you, though. When you're at the bottom, no one wants to be around that. When you start to flourish, people want to pop champagne with you. That's fake love. The relatives who never call me now will want to link up the minute they see me winning, and I already know I won't be picking up. Keep that same energy. If you weren't there when I was down and out, don't come break bread when I'm doing well. If I ever get big money, I'm keeping very few people around me, real and honest people only, and I'd use the rest to put other people in position to win, because when you get money like that you're supposed to be a helpmate.

And I'd stay low-key. I don't want fame. I want an ordinary home, two cars, golf on Saturday, piano lessons from an instructor named Valentino, salmon bites and waffles with Veuve Clicquot at breakfast. I'd fly under the radar. More money, less problems. Biggie said more money, more problems, but he wasn't living my life. I've been through enough hell, and I feel that I deserve some goodness. If I was ever to get rich, I'd break down crying, because all the nonsense would finally be over.

But listen to the last thing, because it's the reason for all of this. You can't take none of this stuff that you grind so hard for with you. Do they have to punch a clock in the afterlife? I'm pretty sure they don't. My father worked seventy and eighty hours a week and plans to retire from the union at sixty, which means I'll probably retire at seventy, if I live that long. Every birthday is closer to the grave. You'll be old before you know it, and the worst feeling in the world would be getting old and realizing you did nothing with your life.

And know what money is for. My father taught me that the people who have always had plenty stop valuing it. The cars, the homes, the

clothes stop meaning anything to them, and they get bored with it. You can have it all and still be empty, and if you've got real demons in your dome, all the money in the world won't fix them. That's why I'm not chasing a billion. I just want to be comfortable. That's my game plan. Enjoy some of the goodness that life has to offer. Even if I never get the whole pie, as long as I can get a taste of the pecan pie, that ought to motivate a man. Love I can't control. My finances I can. So that's where my optimism goes.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ Money is not the root of all evil. Being dead broke is.
- ☛ Before you take advice that money isn't everything, look at the bank account of the person giving it.
- ☛ An average salary used to buy a life, and in 2026 it barely covers rent; that is math, not laziness.
- ☛ Where you start is luck, so never let anybody tell you that you just didn't want it bad enough.
- ☛ You don't need to be a millionaire; you need things that make money while you sleep.
- ☛ Keep the job that pays the rent until the dream pays more, and remember the job will only ever get you by.
- ☛ Walmart is fine and designer is optional; if you can't afford it, you just can't afford it.
- ☛ Pay the bills first and then buy the bottle, because a life that is only bills is not a life.
- ☛ Money lets you choose your company, and the people who only show up when you're winning don't get a seat.

PART FIVE



ATTRACTION AND LOVE

*“Man, believe it or not, you a lot smarter
than people think.”*



MY STEPBROTHER



CHAPTER EIGHT

KNOW WHERE YOU STAND



“I know where I stand. I’ve always known where I stood.”

I was fourteen years old when my father told me women weren’t going to like me. He didn’t yell it. He said it the way you tell a boy the car needs oil. “Chicks ain’t going to dig you. You ain’t light-skinned.” He told my stepbrother, who is a year younger than me, light-skinned, with what the old folks call good hair, that women were going to love him. Two boys in the same house, and two different forecasts. I can replay it like it was yesterday.

My father came up in a time and a community where light skin meant something, and he believed that was the whole story. I never bought into the color complex myself, though I won’t pretend the perks of being light-skinned aren’t real. But it took me until my thirties to say this out loud: my father was right about where I would end up. He was reading the room before I knew there was a room.

At the same time, I was being raised in church, and church teaches you something different. It teaches you that if you’re a good person, walk the straight and narrow, believe in Jesus and treat people right, good

things come to you. So I had two voices in my head growing up. One said you were born to lose. The other said be good and God will send it to you. Only one of them was telling me the truth.

I'm thirty-six. I have been on a handful of dates in my life. I have never had a girlfriend. Never held hands walking through a mall, never shared a gelato with a woman who wanted to be there. I'm in the same position I was in at fifteen. This chapter is about how I came to understand why, and what I think a man in my position ought to do with that understanding. It's just a man telling you the conclusion he came to, and how he got there.

DESTINED TO LOSE

Most people hear that story about my father and think it's the saddest thing they ever heard. I used to think so too. I don't anymore. I had a father that let me know from a young age that I was destined to lose. I was blessed in that area. I've told my mother to her face that the conversation at fourteen is the one thing that saved me. I believe it's the reason I'm still here, and still in my right mind.

Here's why I call it a blessing. A lot of the men I talk to online were never told anything. They got gassed up. Their mothers told them they were handsome, their pastors told them God had somebody picked out for them, their buddies told them they just needed more game. They walked into their twenties expecting it to turn around. When it didn't turn around at twenty-five, and then didn't turn around at thirty, some of those men lost their minds. Nobody had prepared them for the ending, so the ending broke them.

*I had a father that let me know from a young age
that I was destined to lose.*

I never had false hope to lose. By middle school I already knew girls weren't checking for me. I was afraid to step to girls as a teenager, and even then I knew I didn't stand a chance. At twenty-one, my little brother's babysitter told my mother, right in front of me, that she was surprised I had ever been on a date. A stepsister called me a nerd too. None of it surprised me, because my father had already laid the bricks down.

So when my mother told me my bad experiences were the devil and his demons at work, I didn't believe that either. What church told me is a beautiful thing to tell a child. It is also not true in a superficial world. I had to swallow my pride and admit looks matter more than personality. Once I admitted it, I stopped being confused. That premonition of how my story would end is the reason I still have my right frame of mind after all these years.

PERCEPTION RULES THE NATION

One day at work, cooking in the kitchen, a woman told me I stank. I had showered that morning. I wear Maison Francis Kurkdjian every single day, Baccarat Rouge or Gentle Fluidity Silver. I knew what that was. When people don't like how you look, they make things up about you, and then they believe what they made up. No bottle of perfume changes perception. My friend Baraka, who I still miss, used to tell me people don't care about your personality, long before I was ready to believe him.

Perception rules the nation, and looks determine a lot. I never understood in my younger days how much people make judgments about you based on your appearance. I thought it stopped after high school. It doesn't. The same mentality that decided who sat where in the lunchroom decides who gets hired, who gets the benefit of the doubt, who gets coached up when they mess up and who gets nailed to the wall

for the same mistake. I've watched the attractive candidate get the job over the trained one, and then get trained into it.

My aunt told me once that looks fade. She's right, they do. But while you've got them, the way you look determines how the world treats you, and by the time they fade the world has already decided who you are. Nobody gets a refund on the twenty years they spent being treated like the background.

There are names for it, the halo effect and its reverse, the horn effect. I didn't learn the words until later, but I'd been living inside them my whole life. If you look good to people, you can afford to be dumb, because looks trump intelligence. If they don't like your face, they assume the worst and go looking for evidence. My stepbrother told me once, "Man, believe it or not, you a lot smarter than people think." I could hardly believe it. Think about what that sentence tells you about how people had me pegged.

Looks are a cheat code, just like when you're playing a video game and you unlock special features. The better looking people think you are, the more you're allowed to get away with. Think back to Jeremy Meeks and what his face did for him. Meanwhile a man who has done everything right, never been arrested, keeps his haircut, pays his bills, gets treated like the villain because of the face he was born with. I used to blame Satan for that. It never had anything to do with Satan. It's nature taking its course, and nature can be wicked.

And in my experience it's harder for a brother, especially one raised in the suburbs who dresses conservative. In 2020 I was shopping at Nordstrom, and a sales associate let me know, without saying it straight, that the European designer brands weren't really made for urban people. Meanwhile brothers in the NFL and the NBA get Zegna made to measure. I didn't need it said any plainer. I had been read before I opened my mouth. You can't fake the dialect or the demeanor that the urban community expects from a brother, and you can't fake your way out of how people see you either.

WOMEN CHOOSE, AND THEY MAKE IT PLAIN

Here is the thing I wish somebody had told me at fifteen instead of in my late twenties. A man does not choose a woman. A woman chooses the man. Women will make it very apparent to you if they like you. You don't have to guess, you don't have to wonder.

In my mid-twenties a buddy explained what he called choosing signals. The men who seem to approach women so easily aren't being brave. They're responding to a green light that was already on. I never got a green light in my life, so I spent my twenties trying to drive through red ones. In 2018 my grandmother put it plainer than he did. "If a woman really likes you," she said, "she'll ask you out." I'll let you guess how often that has happened to me.

Let me run through my dates, because they tell the whole story. My first date was at nineteen, which is late for most guys, and before the night was over she told me I was soft. Another girl that same year told me she couldn't date me because I was too nice. In 2017, when I was twenty-eight, I took a petite woman I'd met out to eat. Before the date she let me know she wasn't going to be dressed her best. The conversation went fine. She said we'd go skating with her friends. I never heard from her again. In 2019 a date told me I seemed nervous and inexperienced. In 2023 a woman said she couldn't go to the movies with me because her car had just been repossessed.

Looking back, every one of those was the same message in different packaging. If a female tells you before a date that she's not going to be dressed her best, she is implying that you're nothing special. A woman going out with a man she's attracted to puts her best foot forward. The one who said I was too nice, the one whose car got repossessed, the one who promised skating and vanished, none of them were being cruel. They were telling me where I stood, and I was too hopeful to read it. As

for the one who called me inexperienced, in my experience women don't like inexperienced men, but they do a good job of creating them.

I used to get excited when I got a woman's number. I learned eventually that a lot of women give out the number just to get you out of their face. If she doesn't answer the call and doesn't answer the text, that's your answer. I delete the number now. Put yourself in Chris Brown's position for a second. Would a woman ignore his phone call? That's not a mindset difference. That's attraction.

It's not about what women say, it's what they respond to. I've watched women make special accommodations for a man they're attracted to, move him in, feed him, forgive things I'd never be forgiven for. So I stopped listening to what anybody said about personality and started watching who actually got chosen.

That's also why I stopped approaching. One Friday I was leaving a fast food restaurant and a woman at a table was staring at me. So I spoke and asked how she was doing. Outside, I looked back through the window and her friend was giggling. I thought for a second about going back in and asking for her number. I didn't. I knew what that giggle was, and I knew what the walk back to the car would feel like.

People will tell you I should have shot my shot. It's like hopping into a boxing ring and getting a big punch every time. Don't nobody want to deal with that. If you have a history of rejection going back to middle school, you are not being a coward by not approaching. You are reading the pattern. Why would you be self-assured when no women have ever liked you to begin with? I believe approaching is for men who are already wanted. That's not me being bitter. It's me looking at thirty-six years of receipts.

I'll be honest about something else. I've never approached a beautiful woman in my life. I always went after women who were average to below average. I never went after what I really wanted, I settled for anything, and even the settling didn't work out. If every time you make an advance your

advances get declined, that ought to let you know where you stand as a man.

So at thirty-six I keep it cordial with women. I'm polite, I'm respectful, I keep the conversation on the surface, and I don't pursue. An undesired man can't be direct the way a wanted man can. Say what's on your mind and you get looked at like a problem. I'd rather not put myself or her through it. If you got to beg somebody to fool with you, then you already lost.

CONFIDENCE COMES FROM RESULTS

My father did four years in the Navy, and in my early twenties I tried to follow in his footsteps. Around then my cousin's business partner, an Army vet, told me I was lost, and that the military would teach me to never be scared again. I believe the service does give a man discipline and direction. But here's where I landed after thinking it over. If people perceive you in a negative light, it affects you in every area of your life, no matter what you do. A sergeant can work you harder, and the married men in your unit will find it awkward that you've got no wife and kids, same as in an auto shop. Just imagine being in the service, still catching a life of hell.

Everybody had a theory about what was wrong with me. My grandparents worried I was timid as a kid and fretted about how I would turn out. Around twenty, twenty-two, a sister told me I was too passive, which I took to mean I didn't carry that gangster aura. And every dating coach on the internet will tell you it's confidence. Just believe in yourself. Know who you are as a man. I believed that for a long time, and I want to explain why it's backward.

Confidence is a product of success. You can't have confidence without success. The men who walk into a room with a swagger about them have that swagger because, since they were thirteen or fourteen, girls looked at them and smiled. They got the feedback. Middle school and

high school are the developing years. A boy who girls liked at fifteen grows up with a natural confidence money can't buy. A boy who got negative reinforcement over and over grows into an anxious, insecure man. That's not weakness. That's cause and effect. True confidence comes from results. All that matters, man, is the results, receipts.

Social anxiety works the same way. It isn't the cause of being mistreated, it's the symptom of it. Nobody comes into this world feeling down on themselves. Nobody is born defeated. I got that way the same way everybody gets any way, through experience. And here's what gets me. When I tell somebody that, they say, see, it's your mindset. I agree with them. It is my mindset. Society gave me that mindset. My life experiences gave me that mindset. You can't tell a man to think like a winner when he's never once been treated like one.

As a teenager I got clowned for a scrawny little boy physique and a bird chest. I thought I'd never fill out. I did. I've got a man's build now, a wide chest, the same body type as Usher minus the six-pack, and I've got dancing videos to prove it. Nothing changed. If I wasn't the life of the party at fifteen, how am I going to become the life of the party at thirty-six? Come on, give me a break. Going from a zero to a hero isn't a thing I've ever seen happen.

I've seen soft men with wives. I've seen the effeminate guys in church with their legs crossed, happily married with kids. It blew my mind as a young man, because rap told me you had to be rough like DMX. It's not about macho. It's not about dominance. When people tell you that you're soft or not manly enough, they're gaslighting you. All that alpha male and beta male talk is just code words for attractive and unattractive.

I won't lie and tell you it doesn't still hit me. Being intimidated by attractive women was bad in my twenties. It's not as bad now, but it comes back from time to time. A lot of men feel it and aren't man enough to say so. I'm saying so. Don't be ashamed of it. It's the natural result of what you've been through, and it's a journey a lot of us are on together.

YOU CAN'T BUY ATTRACTION

My father had a second lesson for me at fourteen. “If you have enough money, you can have any woman you want.” He kept programming me with it all through my teens: in order to get a woman, son, you got to have something. You got to buy her some Gucci, you got to take her to the Louis Vuitton store. I grew up believing a man has to spend money on a woman before she’ll look at him, and I built a whole dream on that. I wanted to be a millionaire with a Benz, a \$5,000 suit, a Rolex and a refrigerator full of champagne, because I believed that was the only way a beautiful woman would deal with me. No romance without finance. I heard that as a child and took it as gospel. Then I watched my father pay off a woman’s house and still never get a wedding out of it, a story I’ll tell you in the next chapter.

My mother told me once that she sees unattractive men with beautiful women all the time, and she doesn’t know why. She’s playing dumb. Those men have money. That’s the distinction that took me the longest to get. You can’t buy attraction. But at least money will make a woman tolerate your behind. Money is the equalizer. It makes a woman overlook your flaws. It does not make her want you. There are certain things in this world that are not tangible, and attraction is one of them. You either have it or you don’t.

A woman once told me she needed to take me home because I smelled so good. She was complimenting the fragrance, not the man. I know the difference now. You could bathe in L’Occitane and put on a Tom Ford suit and it won’t create chemistry that isn’t there. I used to think a Louis Vuitton suit and a Bentley were requirements. Then I watched men with nothing, no car, no job, in and out of jail, get a woman to move them in and feed them. If you look good to a woman, you become the investment.

Think about what that word means. There’s the investor and there’s the investment. The investor is the one pushing out cash. The investment

is the one receiving it, and over time the investment matures and accrues value. If you're a man and you're the investor, you got the short end of the stick. When a woman is attracted to you, you're the investment. You're the prize. Everything is genuine, everything is a green light. You don't have to try hard, you don't have to pay her bills, you don't have to take her to Houston's to prove anything. She's the one buying you the Rick Owens and the Canali. A man women find sexy is holding a royal flush. He can be broke, he can act any kind of way, and he still wins the hand.

I've noticed that a lot of the men who have always been the investment don't value women much, because they never had to do anything to get the best of them. And that's where real confidence comes from, not money. When people have been choosing you since you were a kid, you feel like you're enough, and you don't need anybody's approval. Money and things only compensate for what the chosen man already has. I wish every man could know what it feels like to be the investment at least once in his life. Most men never will. It's luck, and it goes to a small percentage. If you're reading this book, more than likely you're an investor, same as me.

So here's where I land on it, and I know people won't like it. If you got to have finance in order to get some romance, that just proves you're at a deficit. Being celebrated is better than being tolerated. Every man can't be celebrated. For a man in my position, the honest answer is to get your finances right, because money will at least get you in the room. I don't look down on a man who leads with his wallet, and I don't look down on a man who pays for companionship outright, because that's what unlucky guys have to do. I'd rather a woman be physically attracted to me than be with me for a steak dinner at McCormick & Schmick's. But I've accepted that some men have to take what's on the menu. If a woman ever shows up for me, I'll know it's for the house or the car, and I'll keep my eyes open. That's not bitterness. That's knowing where you stand.

THERE IS NOTHING TO WORK ON

Now I want to talk about the advice. Men in my position get a lot of it, and almost all of it misses the point.

Hit the gym. Females told me I was fat at twenty-one, and I never was. That same year I was going to the gym with my coworkers. I swam laps at the recreation center. I rode my bike until it got stolen. I skated as a teenager and I still skate. I've heard just go to the gym since my early twenties, and at thirty-six people are still saying it. The gym is good for your health. It never changed my love life, and I've seen five-hundred-pound men with wives.

Dress better. My grandmother had me in Rocawear, Coogi and Phat Farm as a teenager. At nineteen a coworker handed me a different shirt on the way to the club like my Lacoste was the problem. In my mid-twenties a friend kept insisting that dress was the thing. I've dressed well my whole life. Meanwhile I ride public transit, and every day I see men on the bus who look like they haven't bathed in years, with a woman and kids sitting right next to them.

Work on your personality. My aunt told me once there's no such thing as an ugly man. Discrimination says otherwise. Most ugly men have the best personalities. That's a brutal truth for you right there. Have a passion. I've got passions: fragrances, suits, dancing, cars. Women don't care about your passion.

Then there's NoFap and semen retention, the latest version of the same promise. I'll admit I almost got bamboozled into believing it would make me attractive. A woman is not psychic. She can't tell what you do behind closed doors. She judges your face. The chemistry has to already be there.

Telling men that are not desired by women to work on themselves, what are they going to work on? There is nothing to work on. A man in his thirties who has never once been chosen is being told the same things

he was told at fifteen. You cannot cook with cold grease. If the heat was never there, no recipe fixes it. You can't become what you never was.

Here's how I figured out the dating coaches. Back in my twenties I watched them and thought they were sincere. Then I noticed every single one of them was a man women had always wanted. They'd been getting girls since they were thirteen. They never had to learn what they were teaching. Never take advice from a person who's not living your reality. An attractive man can't tell me about my situation any more than a rich man can explain being poor from his own experience. Most of them aren't lying on purpose. They're oblivious. They genuinely think their success was game, or mindset, or God, when it was their face.

What I'd ask of anyone giving advice is simple. If you don't have the answer to a person's situation, just tell them that you don't know. False hope is one of the worst medicines that someone can prescribe to a person who's in an unfortunate position. The worst thing you can do is tell a man he has a fighting chance when you can see he doesn't. A lie never helped anybody. The truth hurt me at fourteen, and it's the one thing that has held me together since.

*False hope is one of the worst medicines that someone
can prescribe to a person who's in an unfortunate
position.*

And when somebody tells you to just be yourself, notice that nobody says that to a wanted man. He already is himself, and it's working.

WHAT TO DO WITH THE REST OF IT

So if there's nothing to work on, what do you do? Because you still have to live. That's the part the loud videos skip, and it's the part that

matters.

First, stop doing things for women's approval and start doing them for yourself. Whatever you want to wear as a man, whatever you want to do, do it for your own well-being. I wear Hermès and Maison Francis Kurkdjian because it lifts me up when I walk out the door, not because of who might smell it. I dance because it trims my waistline and because it's joy. I've loved skating since I was a teenager. I like a wine bar and a charcuterie board, and I'm going to hear a symphony orchestra soon. I cut back to two meals a day, not for a woman, but for discipline. If you're in the gym lifting three hundred pounds because you think it'll make you sexy to women, put the bar down and find a better reason. Hobbies won't get you a woman. Hobbies will keep your head on straight. Keep them for what they're for.

Second, get your money right and learn something that pays. I cook for a living, and I'm training to be a mechanic. I started reading trouble codes when my Chevrolet Aveo broke down in 2022, and now I'm in automotive school. Even this channel is work, because you have to think out topics and execute them. The narrative that men like me are lazy basement dwellers is a lie. The men I talk to go to work, go to school, go to the gym, join tennis and bike clubs, sit in wine bars, go to the symphony. When you're doing what you have to do as a man and you still can't get a companion, that just lets you know you're not chosen. It doesn't mean you're unproductive. Stack your money. It gives you options, and it gives you a dignity that doesn't depend on anybody choosing you.

Third, be careful who you talk to about this. The only people that can really understand are dudes that's in this. Don't cast your pearls before swine. Bring this up with a man who has always had women and it turns into an argument, or he writes you off. I learned the hard way that some men turn on you the minute they realize women don't want you. So I keep company with men in my position. When you got a gang of losers, being a loser's not so bad. We understand each other's language. And I've

found that talking about it in a responsible, adult way, not ranting and cursing the way I did in my twenties, makes it less taboo. The more men say it out loud, the less it crushes any one of us.

Fourth, limit the social media. Instagram is a place for attractive people to flex, and your face card is your credentials there. For a man in my position, being bombarded with beautiful women all day will take away your joy. Put the phone down.

Fifth, and this is one I'm still working on. Just because women deem you an unattractive man, don't take a woman's word as the final stamp. I let how women saw me define how I saw myself for a long time. I even made a song about it, a track I wrote on Suno called "Shallow World," full of the brutal things women have said to me, and I never felt I was a terrible-looking guy. Most people are average at best, me included. I'm not deformed. I look regular. The standard out there is runway models, and the average dude doesn't look like he could model for Salvatore Ferragamo. You can know exactly where you stand with women and still not hate the man in the mirror. Like my father always said, just look at the masses. Don't look at the exceptions to the rule.

And if you want to try, try. I still do from time to time, a Latina dating site included. It never hurts to try. But if you're a dude who's never truly been desired, there's no need getting your hopes up high. Try at your own discretion, and don't hang your peace on the outcome.

Last, don't let anybody shame you for the position you're in. You didn't choose it. Being a failure is nothing to be ashamed of. It's just all about the cards you've been dealt. I'd rather be a realist than delusional. If my experiences had been good, I'd have a positive outlook. They weren't, so I have the outlook I've got, and I'm at peace with it. That's not false hope. That's a man who knows where he stands, and decided to keep dancing anyway.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ If you have to guess whether she likes you, she doesn't; a woman who wants you makes it plain.
- ☛ Swagger is what a boy gets back from girls smiling at him, so don't blame yourself for missing what you were never given.
- ☛ A woman who tells you before the date that she won't be dressed her best is telling you where you stand.
- ☛ Money can get you tolerated but never wanted; the investor pays, and the investment gets chosen.
- ☛ Chemistry is there or it isn't, and no gym, wardrobe or personality makeover puts it there.
- ☛ When someone has no answer for your situation, the honest thing is to say so, because false hope is the worst medicine there is.
- ☛ Keep your hobbies for what they're for: they won't bring you a woman, but they'll keep your head on straight.
- ☛ Being passed over by women doesn't make you lazy, so work, study and stack your money anyway.
- ☛ Talk about this only with men who live it; everybody else will argue or walk away.
- ☛ You can know exactly where you stand and still not hate the man in the mirror.

*“A relationship should be give and take,
not take, take, take.”*



MY GRANDMOTHER



CHAPTER NINE

LOVE COMES WITH A PRICE



“Love comes with a price. Love is not free. Just like nothing else is free in this world.”

I grew up in one of the big churches in Atlanta. If you were a church kid there, you know exactly what that means. Sunday service, Bible study, the whole program. And somewhere in all of that I picked up an idea that I carried around like it was scripture: if I kept my heart right, walked the straight and narrow, and waited on God, He was going to bring me a good woman. A Holy Ghost girl. We’d meet in the sanctuary, build a family, travel the world. That was the plan. I believed it from adolescence all the way into my twenties.

My father had a different plan for me, and he gave it to me early. He told me a woman is not going to love you for you. He told me only your mama loves you unconditionally, and that’s only because she brought you into the world. He told me if I ever got married, sign a prenup. At the time I thought he was just being cold. He was an electrician, not a church man, and I figured he didn’t understand what I understood about God and good hearts.

By thirty-six the two versions had finally stopped fighting in my head. One of them had been confirmed by every single thing that happened to me, and one of them had never once shown up. So this is a Life of Hell conversation about love: what I was told it was, what I actually saw, and what it costs a man like me. Stand on your own truth after you hear mine.

WHAT I WAS TAUGHT VERSUS WHAT I SAW

Here's what I was taught, from the pulpit and from my mother. Be a good person. Have a good heart. Just be yourself. Pray for a wife. Choose the right woman. A woman looks at your character, your walk with God, how you treat people. I believed all of that so deep I can still hear it in my own voice.

Here's what I saw. At nineteen I went on my first date with a sister, and before the food came she told me I was soft because I wasn't a gangster and I wasn't from the streets. I told her right there at the table, girl, you're just used to dealing with headbusters, you want me to cuss you out? That was the whole date. Two years later, in 2010, a girl in community college looked me in my face and told me I was ugly as hell. Then she said she was just joking. I knew she wasn't. Those things scar you for life.

Meanwhile the dudes I saw getting chosen, in middle school, in high school, in my twenties, were not the dudes with the best character. They were the dudes with the face card, the tats, the edge, the record. Girls who said they wanted personality gave years of their life to men who had none. That was the story in front of my eyes over and over, and at some point you have to pay attention to patterns.

A lot of us in church wanted to believe the decent, God-fearing woman was sitting a few pews over, waiting on a decent man. My mother still tells me she's out there. I'm thirty-six now, and I have not met her yet. If she was waiting on me, how come when I prayed for a wife, I never got one? A man over thirty has had enough time to look. I'm not telling you

what's true for every man alive. I'm telling you what my own life has shown me.

So here's the lesson I learned slowest. Don't watch what they say. Watch what they do, because the actions will tell you everything you need to know. She said she wanted a good man, so I tried to be a good man. She said looks don't matter, so I worked on everything but my looks. Then I watched who she went home with, and it was never the man she described.

My mother told me when I was fifteen or sixteen that "real love don't exist." She said it offhand and never brought it up again, but I never forgot it, and out of everything she told me growing up it's the one thing I'd say she was completely honest with me about. My grandfather put it his own way: "Son, don't ever try to figure a woman out. You'll never understand women." I spent years trying anyway. I gave it up. I don't try to understand it anymore. I just watch what happens and act accordingly.

LOVE IS NOT FREE

Last year my father and I went out to a restaurant in Midtown. That's rare for us; most of the time we only talk on the phone. Some women were there, we got to vibing with them, and when it was time to pay, my father covered their tab. Almost \$600, for women he didn't even know. I sat there and thought, that's the kind of man I want to be. What I saw him do in that restaurant is a big part of why I keep going to class and keep building.

Once I stopped listening to what people said and started watching what they did, the whole thing got simple. Love, in the real world, has credentials. You have to be good-looking, or you have to have status, or you have to have money. Have one of those three and people will say they love you. Have none of them and your good heart is a receipt nobody wants.

And it's not just women. Be broke and ugly under a bridge and nobody is coming. Be broke and fine under the same bridge and somebody will stop. People love you based on how you make them feel and what they can get from you, and when the conditions change, the love changes. Love is like the weather, subject to change, based on how you make a person feel at that moment.

So when I say most of the relationships I see are transactional, I'm including the ones that look like fairy tales. If you didn't have a woman when you were at the bottom, and you finally get one when you have something, that ought to tell you something. I respect a man who knows exactly why his wife is with him. The men I feel sorry for are the ones who got a woman the same year they got the money and still think it was their personality.

*Love is like the weather, subject to change, based on
how you make a person feel at that moment.*

My father put the whole thing in one sentence when I was young, and it took me until my thirties to hear it: "Some men get women and some men buy women." He wasn't insulting me. He was handing me a map. For a long time I was mad at the map. I always thought I was at least average-looking, never hideous, and I kept waiting for the version of life where the heart counted. Then my thirties came and I had to get it through my noggin: for a man like me, companionship was going to cost. If only I had known that as a teenager. If only I had known it in my twenties. It would have saved me years.

And he didn't just say it. He lived it. When he was married to my mother, she told me, he handed her his whole paycheck. He paid off a woman's house in Maryland. He lived with a woman, paid every bill, bought the groceries, took her to expensive restaurants, paid for her hair

and her nails, and she introduced him to people as her friend. He kept paying anyway. That's the kind of man I come from, and I'm not ashamed of it.

He's not the only one. A man told me once that he was paying a woman's bills, and she wasn't even attracted to him. So here's where I've landed, and I don't want anybody to shame a man for it. If you're not the man women light up for, you lead with what you have. Every man was not blessed to be sexy. Some men have to lead with money. The dating coach who looks down on a man for paying a woman's dinner or her bills is a man women are already attracted to, and he's living on a different planet than me.

But I've gone back and forth on the limits of that plan. Some days I say my goal is to get rich enough to give a woman the world: Chanel, cruises, a ring from Lenox Square, back-to-school clothes for her kids. Other days I catch myself and say what I really want is to be comfortable. A vacation here and there, a nice restaurant, a cheese plate at a wine bar. If you've got to become a millionaire to get a woman, that's insane. I'm training to be an automotive technician. My father is a master electrician, and I've heard a woman say out loud she wouldn't date an electrician. So I know the price can keep rising past what a working man can pay. That's exactly why I'm telling you the price exists.

One more thing, because the law of averages cuts both ways. You already know about the coworker who showed up with cake and champagne on the birthday my family forgot. My father always told me to go by the majority, and the majority of my experience says what I've said above. But I'd be lying if I told you I've never been shown kindness by a woman who wanted nothing from me. It was rare enough that I still think about it.

THE DATING COACHES ARE SELLING YOU FALSE
HOPE

A woman at a restaurant bar gave me her number last year. We talked about Italian food, she said we should hang out, and then she never answered one text. A girl from Taco Bell did the same thing. If that's your history too, nobody has to explain it to you. If you've got a history of being flaked on, if women have always led you on, then you know where you stand. But there's a whole industry waiting to tell you otherwise. Learn game. Build confidence. Get hobbies. Go to the gym. Be persistent. You just don't know how to talk to women. I've heard every one of them, and I tried them all.

Persistence first. In my experience, if a woman wants you, you'll know, because she'll text you good morning, she'll follow up, she'll offer to pay for the meal. My rule now is simple: I'll call or text a couple of times, I'll make my interest known, and if nothing comes back, I leave it alone. If you have to beg somebody to do something, that means they don't want to do it anyway. The men telling you to keep pushing after a no are men who never had to push. Chris Brown is not being persistent with anybody.

Then there's the line that you don't know how to talk to women. I think that's a shaming tactic. I've had great conversations with women. You don't need to talk about covalent bonds or Napoleon. You talk about life, your goals, what you want, the same way you talk to anybody. I don't believe there's a magic word you have to say to a woman to make her drop her panties. A female acquaintance once told me she'd gone on dates with boring men and liked them anyway because they were her type, and in the same breath told me I had a great personality. That told me everything about where personality ranks.

What gets me is the dishonesty of the runaround. The men I know are honest about what they want, even when what they want isn't pretty. At

least we're honest about our intentions. The women I dealt with mostly weren't. I've had women agree to hang out and then flake, agree to a plan and then go quiet. Not one of them ever looked me in the face and said, you're not my type. I'd have respected that more than the silence. It's the same honesty my father gave me at fourteen, and I'd take a hard truth over a polite disappearing act every time.

The gym one gets me, because I went to the gym hard in my twenties. I didn't go for women. I went to fight the demons in my own head. It helped with that. It didn't change who looked at me twice.

The painful part is my own father. He looks at me now, thirty-six with no wife and no kids, and tells me I just don't know how to talk to women. He prophesied the whole thing and then blamed me for the prophecy coming true. That's how it goes for a man. You're held accountable even for the things you can't control.

*He prophesied the whole thing and then blamed me
for the prophecy coming true.*

And then there's the oldest false hope of all, the one from the older gentlemen. My father is fifty-eight. His buddy still tells me to go to church to find a good woman. My aunt told me the same thing last month. I was raised in church. I was there every week for the better part of three decades looking for exactly that woman. I never met her, and neither have a lot of the men who write me. The older men mean well, but they came up in a world where a man could be a brickmason and have a family, and that was enough. A walk in the park and a love card meant something. A woman might pick you up in her car. A man who is fifty-eight years old cannot give a young dude of twenty-two, or even a man in his thirties, advice about women. If he was twenty-two again he'd be in for a rude awakening. Don't let anybody charge you money to

pretend otherwise. How do you give motivation to a dude who has never been wanted by nobody? You can't.

TEENAGE LOVE IS THE REALEST LOVE THERE IS

Growing up, I wanted what I saw the older brothers have. Men in their forties, fifties and sixties with healthy marriages, traveling with their wives, doing romantic things. A happy Black marriage. That was the picture I carried for my own life, and at some point I had to erase it from my database. Not because those marriages weren't real. Because the world that made them is gone.

Talk to married men. Ask them how they met their wife. They'll tell you fifteen. Sixteen. Sophomore year of college. Almost never thirty-five or forty. The ones who tell you there's somebody for everybody are the same ones who found their somebody in homeroom. The older men met the love of their life when they were teenagers. Men in my generation found out as teenagers that we were going to be alone. I was fifteen when I realized girls didn't like me, and nothing since has proven that fifteen-year-old wrong.

My father's generation came up in a different world. I've tried to explain to him that the 80s were not today, when life wasn't so expensive and a regular working man was enough. I can point to plenty of average men in their fifties and sixties who've been happily married forever. They weren't special. They came up at the right time.

My grandmother gave my grandfather money to go to college in the 70s. Think about that. She was building with a man who had nothing yet. That's what love looked like in my grandparents' generation. In mine, the woman shows up when the meal is already cooked. If you want to know the one woman you could actually trust in this life, it's the one who chose you when you were at the bottom. If a woman is attracted to you, you don't have to have anything. I used to think you had to take her to

Nordstrom. The news stories I cover every week show me a man can bring nothing but his face.

So if the window was open for you at sixteen and you were inside it, thank God and hold on. If the window never opened, be honest with yourself about what that means for the years ahead. My father says, "Life is a timed art. If you don't have certain things by a certain age, it's pretty much over." I hated hearing it, and at thirty-six I can't refute it. The men who tell me I still have a shot are blowing smoke. I'd rather go by the law of averages than by a stranger's optimism.

That's not me telling you to lay down. It's me telling you to stop measuring yourself against men who played a different game. The older brother with the long marriage got lucky in a time that let him get lucky. Some days I feel like I'm part of the wrong generation. You weren't dealt that hand either. It's an unfortunate deck of cards, and it's not your fault.

SIGN THE PRENUP

For years a sister was always my first preference. I wanted that happy Black marriage I saw in the older brothers. But at thirty-six I have to be honest about my own track record. The women I tried with wanted the dude from the streets, and the one who sat across from me at nineteen called me soft for not being him. So now I'm open. An Asian woman, a Spanish woman, overseas if that's what it takes.

I'm not the only one thinking that way. A man I know personally went to Djibouti to get married. I'm on SakuraDate myself, talking to Asian women, most of them overseas. My buddy was the first one to point out to me how many of the men flying across the world for a wife are brothers. I don't knock any of them. Most of them want a wife, not a vacation. But if you've got to cross an ocean to find somebody who'll have you, that's how you know you're down bad at home.

The anti-marriage crowd online has me twisted. I've never been against marriage. I still want it. I told my mother the main reason I want

it, and she didn't love the answer, but it's the truth: intimacy. After that, companionship, because I don't believe anybody is genuinely happy alone, no matter what they post. And after that, finances. My father tells me all the time, "You need a wife not just for intimacy, but for leveling up." Two people on one financial goal climb faster than one. I'm not picky about how it comes, either. I'd marry a forty-year-old woman with kids and be a stepdad. I've prayed for exactly that. And I love weddings: the class of them, the champagne, the scent somebody picked for the day.

But my father gave me the other half of that advice in the same breath, and he lived it himself. If you ever get married, sign a prenup. If she won't sign, walk away. He has one. I'll have one. If a man is getting married in 2026 without a prenup, he's crazy. When a marriage ends, it's the man who pays, every time, and I've built too much with my own hands to hand half of it to somebody who decided she was done. Courts throw some of them out. Sign it anyway.

A marriage is supposed to be give and take. My grandmother always said, "A relationship should be give and take, not take, take, take." Fifty-fifty, two people building something. I watched the opposite growing up. My stepfather was an automotive tech who went to work every day, and the way I saw it, my mother sat on her behind and didn't try to help the man. If one person carries the whole load and the other contributes nothing, that's not a marriage, that's a bill. And if it's arguments every single day, file the paperwork.

Now, why won't so many men my age and younger get married at all? People act like it's a character flaw. It's arithmetic. The standards I hear now are on steroids: five hundred thousand a year, a model's face, a man who already has the bag before you meet him. Most men are lucky to see a hundred thousand. My father's trade, my trade, a chef, a welder, a plumber: those used to be enough to build a family on. Now they're an excuse not to answer the text. Some days I wish I'd been born into a Middle Eastern or Indian family where my parents would pick somebody for me, and I would never have to be lonely again. If a man is all alone

without a wife and children, it's not necessarily his fault. It's the generation he's a part of. Stop bashing those men.

And the hard part for men like me, because it's what I'd tell my own son: in my experience marriage has been a privilege handed to men women already wanted. If you've been on the back burner your whole life and you finally get a wife at thirty-eight because you got your money right, go in knowing exactly why she's there and protect yourself accordingly. I've made peace with being tolerated for what I have, if that's the best I can do. I'd rather have that than nothing.

There's one more thing that keeps me balanced, and I say it to myself every time I scroll past a couple on a beach. You don't go home with these people. You don't see what's going on behind closed doors. I could be married tomorrow and it could be World War Three in my house every night. Some of these marriages deserve Oscars. So don't envy the ring. Envy the peace, if it's real, and understand you can't see from outside whether it is.

LUST IS NOT A CRIME

Growing up Christian, I was taught to be ashamed of being a man. Lust was a sin. Desire was a sin. Thinking about a woman the way a man thinks about a woman was something to repent for on Sunday. That religion teaches you to suppress how you feel as a man.

My grandfather set me straight when I was seven or eight years old, and I didn't even know it. I came home from a sermon on lust, troubled about it, and told him what the pastor said. He looked at me and said, "Son, it's normal for a man to lust." That was it. No lecture. He was the one person in my life at that age who told me my body wasn't a crime scene. Years later he was also the one who sat me down for the birds and the bees, a talk my mother never had with me.

It took me into my thirties to really believe him. God made women. You're going to lust. The desire you feel is a reminder that you're a

normal man, nothing to condemn yourself for. Even my mother, who still tells me to pray for a godly wife, would rather I take care of myself than pay a woman for company, and the church she sent me to calls both of those a sin. The religion tells you to suppress it and gives you nowhere to put it.

Here's the practical side, because I lived the cost of getting this wrong. One of my biggest mistakes with women was keeping everything PG. Surface-level. Polite. I treated every woman like a Bible study partner because that's what I was trained to do. You cannot walk up to a stranger talking x-rated; that'll scare her off. But once you've built rapport with a woman, you have to let her know how you feel as a man, in the bedroom and out of it. I didn't. I kept it holy and I kept it lonely.

At nineteen I was alone in a room with the first girl I ever took on a date. I had no protection and I didn't go to the store to get any. That was the one real opportunity I've had in my life, and nothing like it has come around since. Some days I call that one of my biggest regrets. Other days I remind myself that unprotected sex today is Russian roulette with your whole life and I'd rather have been safe than sorry. Both of those are true. But don't let the church convince you that wanting her was the sin. Wanting her was the one normal thing in the room.

THE THINGS I'D DO WITH A WIFE

Valentine's Day was fun when I was a kid. Elementary school, little cards, candy in a paper bag, everybody gets one. Then you grow up and you like the opposite sex and you find out the holiday was never for everybody. At nineteen I bought a Valentine's gift for a girl who was another boy's girl. I think about that and it's pitiful. I've never had a valentine as a grown man. Not one. Some years I was sad. Some years I was mad.

That's how it feels from the outside, guys: Valentine's Day is a day to poke fun at people who are not wanted. The commercials, the cards, the

restaurant specials, all of it is propaganda for one lousy day that reminds the unchosen man exactly where he stands. It's a happy day for the people who are desired and a sad day for the rest of us. If love was as real as the candy, some men wouldn't go their whole lives without a single taste of it. Some do. I'm one of them, so far. And when the people who have love tell you there's somebody for everybody, ask them where that leaves the men who die alone. They never have an answer.

So here's how I get through it, and it's the only coping I've found that works. I imagine the day I'd have if I had a wife. I get dressed up. We go to Chateau Elan and drink champagne by the fireplace. An elegant restaurant, Armand de Brignac, Bach and Chopin on the speakers. Ice skating. A movie. A bubble bath with the bottle on the ledge. Then home. I build that day in my head in detail and it keeps me in good spirits, and I'd tell any man in my shoes to do the same. Don't let the holiday tell you what you'd do with it. You tell the holiday.

Because I know exactly what I'd do with a wife. I've thought about it more than I've thought about anything. A Brioni tuxedo and a Ludovico Einaudi concert, then Ray's on the River with a bottle of Armand de Brignac Blanc de Noirs and a crème brûlée between us. Morocco, where my father has been. Cannes. The Maldives, Fiji, Cancun. Walking a beach at sunset with a glass of wine, a pink sky like the one Kendrick Lamar put in my head. Fragrance shopping together at Neiman Marcus and letting her pick the one I wear. An all-white tuxedo on a cruise to the Bahamas, her in an all-white dress with a piña colada and the Caribbean breeze. Two people building an empire together. A Black man with out-of-the-box tastes showing a woman a whole new world. Those are the experiences a man needs. Those are the experiences that make you well-rounded as a man.

I know some men will never get those experiences. I may be one of them. I've cried about it, usually late at night when I think about the bloodline ending with me, no wife, no children, nobody to remember I was here. Doing it all by yourself is really, really hard. Anybody who tells

you being alone is a blessing is coping, and I'm not going to lie to you in print.

And still, in the middle of all this hell, I have to remind myself that some people really are living life to the fullest. Some couples really are on that beach, at peace. It's real for somebody. That's what I hold onto. That's why I still pray for a wife, even though you already know how those prayers have gone so far. It's hard to make it alone, and I'm not too proud to ask. All I ever wanted in life was a beautiful wife, to travel the world together, and to have a good time.

That's the whole chapter. Love comes with a price. I'm still trying to afford it. And if I never can, at least I know the number. That's more than I knew at fifteen.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ Love is not free, and anybody who tells a young man it is should have to explain why some men die without a taste of it.
- ☛ Watch what she does, not what she says; her actions will tell you everything her mouth won't.
- ☛ Some men get women and some men buy women, and there's no shame in knowing which one you are.
- ☛ Make your interest known a couple of times, and if nothing comes back, leave it alone; begging never turned a no into a yes.
- ☛ The older men mean well, but their advice was built for a time when a brickmason could raise a family.
- ☛ Stop measuring yourself against the married men of your father's generation; they were dealt a different hand.
- ☛ If you marry, sign the prenup; if she won't sign, walk, and know you just saved yourself.
- ☛ Lust is not a sin, it's the proof you're a man; the church had that backwards and it cost me years.
- ☛ Don't envy the couple on the beach, because you don't go home with them.
- ☛ Build the Valentine's Day you'd have in your head in full detail, and don't let the holiday tell you what you are.



PART SIX



FAITH AND THE MIND

“Son, all that church stuff is a game.”



MY GRANDPARENTS



CHAPTER TEN

WHY I LEFT THE CHURCH



“I believe in God, but I believe that God has favorites. It’s no way that God can favor everyone.”

I went to daycare in a church. Let that sink in before I say anything else. Before I could read, before I could tie my shoes, I was already inside the building, already being taught. My grandmother, my mother and my aunt took me to World Changers in College Park, Creflo Dollar’s church, and that is where I spent my childhood. I was on the gospel rap team. I went to the summer camps. I went to teen church. I was a church boy all the way through.

The memory that stays with me most is the finance conventions. My grandmother would take me, and I would sit there as a kid and watch grown men in expensive suits work the whole building into a frenzy about money. I remember Dr. Leroy Thompson, the “Money Cometh” preacher, dancing across the stage while the whole building chanted “money cometh to me now, in Jesus’ name.” Preachers talking about Bentleys and Rolls-Royces and two-million-dollar homes. I was a child. I believed every word of it. I thought that was what God looked like.

Every time I saw Creflo in the pulpit in those nice suits, it motivated me. It gave me a zeal to want the good life. I will give him that. But looking back now, as a grown man, the way I see it those conventions were about the money. Not my money coming to me. My grandmother's money going to them.

I have not set foot in a church since 2017. I was twenty-eight when I walked away. This chapter is about why. Not to bash anybody. Just to tell you what I saw, what I was taught, what it did to me, and what I believe now that I am thirty-six and thinking with my own brain.

“SON, ALL THAT CHURCH STUFF IS A GAME”

Here is what I was taught. If you are a good person, good things come to you. If you walk the straight and narrow, pray, tithe and stay humble, the Lord has a special plan for your life and you are blessed and highly favored. God won't give you more than you can bear. Trouble don't last always. If you get right with the Lord, he will put a God-fearing wife in your life. Don't lean on your own understanding. Crucify the flesh. Prayer changes things.

I believed all of it. I believed it all the way into my twenties.

And here is the thing. There were people in my own family telling me something different the whole time, and I did not listen because I was a kid and the church had me. My grandparents, who both had degrees, used to tell me, “Son, all that church stuff is a game.” They sat through those sermons and told me the preaching was foolishness. I thought my grandfather was being mean. My mother got angry with them for saying it. Now, at thirty-six, I see they were right about every bit of it. My grandfather, who barely went to church, was also the one who told me at seven or eight that lust is normal.

My father didn't raise me day to day, but he was the realest person in my life, and he had one rule he repeated until I could say it in my sleep: the spirit has nothing to do with the physical. You live in a physical world.

You cannot apply spiritual principles to the physical realm; it is not going to work. He told me that if I kept focusing on things of the spirit, I was going to find myself under a bridge feeling the cold winter air. He told me, “If it ain’t got nothing to do with no money, it’s really not important.” People called him negative. I listened to him anyway, because everything he said kept coming true.

I want to say something about the fear, because people who were not raised in it do not understand. My aunt bought me Carman tapes and took me to gospel plays and to the Carman concerts, where they had Satan and demons acting on stage. My grandmother watched hell documentaries with me. To a child, those gospel videos were horror movies. I had nightmares about the devil coming to get me. I thought every noise in the house was a demon. I wet the bed until I was twelve, and I truly believe that fear is why. Being raised Christian instills so much fear in you that you are scared of everything. It programs you to be scared. That is what it did to me as a child, and I do not blame myself for it. I blame the church.

WHAT DID IT DO FOR YOU?

There is a friend I have been talking to since 2017, and he keeps asking me the same question: what did it do for you? What did going to church do for you? Did it put you in a better financial position? Did it elevate you in any kind of way? That is the test for anything you spend your life on, and church fails the test.

I look at all the hell I have experienced in my life and I ask: what did going to church do for my life? It did nothing for me. I did not find a wife in church. I did not find real friends in church. My prayers were not answered in church. I prayed to God for money, for a woman, for success, and I got nothing. I told my mother the same thing. She has been in church her whole life, she taught at that church, and her life is not where she wants it to be either. My father’s definition of insanity is doing the

same thing every week and expecting a different result. That was me every Sunday.

The people were the first thing that broke it for me. I was brainwashed to think the church was a haven of good, honest, wholesome people. I thought I would build lifelong friendships there and meet a godly woman and live happily ever after. What I actually saw was a show. It was like going to an audition for a movie, everybody acting, everybody putting on a fake little persona. People would smile in my face, pray over me, and gossip about me when I walked away. The church folks I knew were no different from the people I ran into in the street. I remember a fight breaking out at a youth event once. A man who prayed over me in the youth ministry turned up at a club in Atlanta with the baddies. The teen church felt like Birthday Bash. Between the music and the way people dressed, I would literally forget I was in the house of God.

And I never met the Holy Ghost girl they sang about. My mother told me to find a godly, virtuous woman. The whole church told me, “Son, you just got to go to church and meet you a godly woman.” I swore I would. But in my experience the women in church were looking for the same thing as the women in the club: the sexy dude in the Benz, the CEO in the Ferragamo suit. It just had a godly title on it. I am not saying decent people do not exist. I am saying I went to the house of God my whole life looking for them and came up empty, and if you cannot find them there, I do not know where you are supposed to look.

Then there is the money. The church is a business. That is one thing I had to realize. It is not about saving lives. When Druski put out that megachurch skit, the pastor telling the congregation nobody could leave until they raised four million dollars, then running off a member who hadn’t tithed from his Bentley, everybody laughed because everybody knew what he was poking at. The way I see it, a lot of these pastors are all about fleecing the flock, and we all know it is a game. From what I have seen, plenty of them care more about their Prada suits and their Rolexes than about your soul, and plenty of the gospel artists are chasing the same

secular money, doing songs with the very artists the church told us to stay away from. I remember a clip of Creflo from around 2009 saying that if it weren't for the blood of Jesus, he'd make people tithe at gunpoint. In 2022 he told his church that his old tithing teaching was not correct. From where I sat, the preacher was the only one in that building living the abundant life. The members were not living any abundant life. Ask Creflo for twenty-five million after a lifetime of membership and see what happens.

I will be honest with you about something. In 2015 I started reading the whole Bible because I was thinking about becoming a preacher. I can speak well, I love elegance, and I had watched men get rich in that pulpit my whole life. It looked like one of the easiest ways to come up, because people will give you their last dime. My father told me, "You don't come from preacher type of men." And the more I thought about it, the more I knew I could not do it. I did not want to be a fraud. I did not want to be fake. I wanted to be real. If you play with God, he is going to deal with you. So I did not become a preacher, and two years later I stopped going altogether. Women still tell me I look like a bishop, and a woman at work once took me for a preacher. Where I come from, that is not a compliment. Being a preacher is code for loser.

DON'T PRAY, JUST DO

When I was twenty-two or twenty-three I worked with a guy named Dominique, an artist from Los Angeles who painted these elegant pictures. One day he told me, "Don't pray, just do." I answered him the way a church boy answers: I pray. It did not land on me then. It took years, and a whole lot of wasted time waiting on miracles, before that sentence made sense to me. The people who do instead of pray end up way ahead.

I used to pray for everything. I prayed for a wife. I prayed for big money and the abundant life they preached about: a yacht in Miami,

champagne on the deck, fettuccine and veal. I prayed for a home, a BMW, an Alfa Romeo, Brunello Cucinelli, Loro Piana, Magnanni shoes. When I was in school, my mother's mother told me not to study for the test, just pray for the answers. My grandmother told me to study the arithmetic or get a tutor. Guess which one was right. I really used to pray to God to give me the answers so I could pass the test. See how delusional I was?

Nobody is going to knock on your door with a Brioni suit. You go to work, and you go to Nordstrom. My grandmother bought me the Paige jeans I wear. I did not pray for them. Sitting around praying for God to send you a Zegna suit is not going to happen. You have to put in the work. The one thing I still agree with Creflo on is that faith without works is dead, but all people ever heard was the "I'mma just pray" part.

While I was sitting around praying for a miracle, I could have been making a way, doing something, instead of sitting around building air castles. That is what church cost me. Not money. Time. All those years I could have been building a financial position, learning a trade like my father kept telling me to, the automotive work I am only learning now in my thirties. Somebody could have been teaching me a skill I could use as an adult while I was sitting there believing in Jehovah Jireh and Jehovah Nissi and El Shaddai, names that I now believe were made up, which is why nobody's life ever changed from shouting them.

That is what church cost me. Not money. Time.

So here is my rule on prayer, and I know it sounds harsh. If you have been praying for something for a long time and God has not given it to you, it is time to stop praying. Evidently your prayer means nothing to him. If you have been going to church your whole life praying for a miracle and nothing has come to pass, that ought to tell you it is not working. You can pray until you are blue in the face and stay in the same

spot. Praying to God for years with no change is like praying to the Easter Bunny every day. You are wasting your time.

And when somebody tells you to “just pray about it,” understand what they are really saying. They are saying they do not have an answer. If you do not have an answer for a person, just say I don’t know. Don’t gaslight somebody who has been praying his whole life by telling him to pray harder. All religion is, is false hope. It sells a dream that something is going to fall out of the sky. Good things do not come to those who wait. Good things come to those who hustle.

GOD HAS FAVORITES

My father told me this years ago and I did not want to hear it: God has favorites. You can pray about things and God still will not bless you, because praying does not mean he is working on your behalf. My mother’s mother used to tell me, “God is no respecter of persons.” I sang “his mercy endures forever” in that church a thousand times. I am telling you now, as a grown man who has paid attention, that was not true. Not for everybody.

A guy told me years ago that everybody is not going to live a good life. Up to then I believed everybody got a turn, because that is what I had been raised on: be good, pray, wait, and yours will come. That one sentence shattered it. My father put it even plainer: “Some people are better than some people.” That is one of the realest things anybody ever told me.

Use your eyes. Some people are born with everything it takes to win: a great family, a high IQ, a face that opens doors. Some people are born with everything it takes to lose. That is not a mindset. That is genetics, and genetics is the luck of the draw, like my father always said. Some people struck gold and some people struck coal. Some people experience nothing but pain, and some people get all the champagne. I was taught that the wealth of the wicked is laid up for the righteous. I have never

once seen it happen. From what I have seen, the people with good character and genuine hearts are the ones who get the pain, and nobody in a pulpit has ever given me a logical answer for that.

The way I picture it, God has a diary, and he writes people's names in it with a Montblanc pen. Chris Brown is in there. Jeremy Meeks is in there. The CEOs and the rappers and the people who have never had to struggle for a woman or a dollar in their life, they are in there. Unfortunately our names are not showing up in the favorites book. I know for a fact I am not one of God's favorite people. If I were, my life would look different, and so would yours.

The church had an answer for everybody catching hell: God is testing you. Those who endure adversity are chosen for greatness. I believed that. I thought being tested meant I was special and a big blessing was coming. But why does God got to keep testing you? Why isn't he testing everybody else? Everybody is not catching hell. Some people have great lives from the day they are born. For a lot of people there is no blessing at the end of the tunnel. That is just the hand they were dealt.

I grew up singing "Trouble Don't Last Always" like it was a promise. Once you start thinking on an intellectual level, you hear what that song is really telling you, and it is misleading. Trouble does last for some people, and it never goes away. It lasts so long in some people's lives, you might as well say trouble is their best friend. Sometimes trouble lasts until the day you die. And here is the common sense nobody wants to say from the pulpit: if God ain't fixed it yet, he not going to fix it. That is the real sermon the preacher needs to be preaching.

"God don't give you no more than you can bear." If that were true there would be no people strung out under bridges. The amount of suffering in this world tells you something, and I came to the only honest conclusion I could: I believe God wanted some people to suffer. My father told me years ago that God created some people to be messed up. I thought he was being insensitive, or joking. I do not think he was joking anymore.

So I have questions for the Creator, and I think I have a right to ask them. If I only got one, it would be this: why do some people get more pain than anything else? Why create a man so unattractive that nobody will ever love him? Why create somebody disabled, or born into a family that does not care about him, and then drop him in a world as cruel as this one, knowing how people are? To create a person and put him in a bad position on purpose is just evil. That is some sadistic stuff right there. If I were the Creator, everybody would be sexy, everybody would be rich, everybody would have a high IQ. Every man would have a wife. Nobody would be homeless, and nobody would go hungry. There would be no sadness and no despair. It would be sunshine and champagne bottles popping every day. When you create people different, you are creating injustice. You are creating insecurity, low self-esteem and jealousy. A fair Creator would have made everybody the same. Everyone deserves a fair shot, but everyone is not given one, and that is the whole problem.

That is why I say blame God, not the loser. Nobody chooses to lose. How are you going to blame the victim for his misfortune when God is the one pulling the strings? I will take responsibility for the parts of my life I can control. The parts I cannot control, my face, my genetics, the family I was born into, I put on God, because he is the one who made me.

YOUR HEAVEN AND HELL IS RIGHT HERE

My father told me something that undid years of fear in one sentence: your heaven and hell is right here on earth. If you do nothing with your life, your life will be hell. The rich experience heaven on earth. Most people slave away in hell on earth. You do not have to die to experience heaven or hell. It is all about the cards you were dealt.

Think about who talks about heaven the most. It is the people who have been through hell down here. My father put it bluntly: people who talk about dying and going to heaven to get greatness are the ones who messed up this life, so they have to go somewhere else for salvation. The

people holding on to faith the hardest were the ones in the worst positions. I watched my stepfather sit all day with the Bible open, watching religious programming and crying. I watched my grandmother order a TV preacher's miracle water. If the religion worked, why were the most faithful people the most broke?

I grew up terrified of hell. I have told you about the nightmares. But when you have lived a life of hell, the fear goes away, because there is nothing left to threaten you with. If there is a hell after we leave this physical world, well, that will just be part two of how life has been. That is not me being tough. That is me being honest about where I stand. When a celebrity joked on a podcast that hell is going to be lit like a club and heaven is going to be boring, people lost their minds. I gave him credit for his honesty. Nobody knows what is on the other side. What you believe about it was put in you by where you were born and who raised you. The South is religious, so I was religious. That is all it was. What I hope is waiting over there, I will save for the last chapter of this book.

*If there is a hell after we leave this physical world,
well, that will just be part two of how life has been.*

And nobody has seen this big bad devil. Not one person. I feel the big bad devil is people. Look at the world. Look at a cookout in a park where a crowd is celebrating and somebody opens fire. Where was God to prevent that? Look at a pastor who kills his own wife. The demons I was warned about my whole childhood turned out to be walking around in human bodies, some of them in the pews.

THE ONLY RELIGION I'M PART OF IS REALITY

I want to be clear about one thing, because people get it twisted. I did not become an atheist. I did not become a Satanist. Just because somebody is no longer a Christian does not mean he is a Satanist. It just means he is done with the foolishness. I believe in the Most High, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I believe there is something on the other side. I just do not have to call myself a Christian to believe that, and I do not have to sit in a building every Sunday giving my money to a man in a Brioni suit. You can have a relationship with God without going to church. If anybody asks my religion today, I tell them non-religious. The only religion I am in tune with at thirty-six years old is reality.

What changed me was logic. The more logic and reason you use, the less religious you will be. That is not an insult. It is just what happened to me. To a spiritual person, logic is like sunlight to a vampire. Christianity told me not to lean on my own understanding, and I now think that is the most ignorant thing I was ever taught. God gave me a brain. I believe in God, but I use my brain.

There comes a point where you have to start questioning what the preacher is saying in the pulpit and start using your dome. Look at things from more than one point of view. I will go further than that: even the devil might be telling you something you need to hear. A one-track mind never learned anything. Anything that controls the way you think, how you talk and how you live is mind control. My father used to put it this way: try walking out of a grocery store with a buggy full of groceries while you are thinking on a spiritual level, and see if they don't arrest you. His rule is the one I live by now: "If it don't make sense, it's probably some nonsense." Faith is the evidence of things not seen, and I do not care about what I cannot see. I care about what is in front of me. Time will tell you everything you need to know.

Here is what religion did to me as a man, and I have to say it. It made me a chump. It made me scared. It groomed me to be meek and humble and overly nice and to think everybody had good intentions, and then it sent me out into a world full of wolves. Being raised in the church makes you soft, makes you trusting, makes you overly nice, and that will get you eaten up by the sharks. I gave people the benefit of the doubt who did not deserve it. I forgave people who spat in my face. I tried to be Mr. Rogers in a world that eats Mr. Rogers alive. My father told me church men are punks, and that a man is supposed to be a warrior. "You can't be a man of God in an evil world," he said. I had to learn that the hard way, in my thirties, when it should have been taught to me at twelve.

And it had me walking around guilty for being a man. For years I felt condemned for looking at a woman, for the music I listened to, for things that every man does. Just think about how wicked that is, to be told that your nature is a sin. Guilt and fear are two bad qualities to have. You should not be walking around full of guilt and fear. Ever since I backed away from the body of Christ, I have been more of a man than I have ever been in my life. I feel liberated. My mind has gotten clearer every year since 2017. I used to think everything would be peaches and cream because God had a special plan for me. Now I look at things for what they are, and I can finally make decisions based on what is real.

I do not argue about it with anybody anymore. My mother still texts me that only God can make your life great and that if I get right with the Lord he will send me a wife. I do not debate her. I love her, but you cannot bring logic to a spiritual person without them getting defensive. People believe what they want to believe. I just pay attention to what life has shown me, because the people telling me to have faith are not living my reality.

If I ever became a father, I would not take my kids to church. I would tell them about God. I would not beat them over the head with a Bible, and I would not fill them with fear of a devil nobody has seen. I would teach them what matters in this world, how to read people, how to make

money, how to keep an edge, and the time I spent in church, I would spend teaching them a skill. That is the one thing I can do with what happened to me: make sure it does not happen to the next one.

So every summer I think about that anniversary, the year I stopped going, and I may pour a glass of Moët for it. Not because I hate anybody in that building, but because walking out of it was the best decision I ever made for my own mind.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ Ask yourself what church actually did for you, and if the honest answer is nothing, stop giving it your Sundays.
- ☛ If you have been praying for the same thing for years and it has not come, stop praying for it and go do something about it.
- ☛ Faith without works is dead, and the works are the only part that ever paid me.
- ☛ God has favorites, and pretending otherwise just makes you blame yourself for things you never controlled.
- ☛ If there is a hell after this life, for a lot of us it will only be part two.
- ☛ Nobody has seen the big bad devil, but you will meet plenty of people doing his work, some of them in the pews.
- ☛ You can believe in God without belonging to a church, a title or a pastor's business.
- ☛ Any teaching that tells you to stop using your own understanding is a teaching to walk away from.
- ☛ Guilt and fear are heavy things to carry, and you do not owe either one to anybody for being a man.

*“There’s no crime in being ignorant. The
crime is to remain ignorant.”*



MY FATHER'S BEST FRIEND



CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE MINDSET IS AN ARCHIVE



“The mind is an archive of experiences, and if you’ve had nothing but bad stuff happening in your life, you ain’t changing your mindset.”

I grew up in church, and the message I heard from the pulpit over and over was some version of change your mind, change your life. My pastor preached it like a promise. I heard a version of it at home too, because my mother was always trying to get me to read *The Power of Positive Thinking*. She called my father negative. She called my grandparents negative. Later on she called me negative too. The message from church and from her was the same: don’t look at your current circumstance, think the right thoughts, and the life will follow.

I wanted it to work that way. I wish I could tell myself I’m a millionaire and wait for the Zegna and the silk-cashmere shirts to show up at the door. They never came.

My father preached something different. He never went to church a day in his life, and he told me one thing over and over: look at things for what they are. Live in reality, son. The family called him crazy my whole

childhood, and he'd say so himself: "But real is crazy." I listened to him anyway, because he was the realest person I ever knew, and the older I get the more I see he was right.

Here is what I figured out in my thirties, and I don't think there's anything I've said in a Life of Hell conversation that I believe more firmly. Your mind is not a magic wand. Your mind is a hard drive. It's a tape recorder. It's a library. Everything that has ever happened to you got stored in it, and what's stored in it is what you think with. Your mindset is nothing more than a cultivation of your life experiences. The mindset does not create your life. The mindset is a record of your life.

That's the whole chapter right there. But I'm going to say it a few more ways, because it is hard to hear when you've been told the opposite since you were a kid.

YOUR THOUGHTS DON'T CREATE YOUR REALITY

Here's the saying I got tired of: as a man thinketh, so is he. Sounds beautiful. Sounds biblical. It's foolishness. You can only think based on what your life has produced. If I had my way the Bible would read *as a man experiences, so is he*.

Think about how a hard drive works. Whatever data you put on it is what comes back out when you open the file. Your life experiences work the same way. If those hard drives have a lot of negative data stored in them, that's going to produce a person with a pessimistic mindset. Nobody chose that. A kid who got bullied every day did not get bullied for having a bad attitude. He got a bad attitude from getting bullied. The order is backwards from what they tell you. Your thoughts don't create your reality. The reality you live in creates your thoughts.

People with confidence and peace have had goodness in their lives. People with negative mindsets have had hell. You can't wake up one morning and decide to have self-esteem. You have to have a reason to walk with your head up high, and not everybody has one. Floyd Mayweather

used an old boxing saying for it: “You can’t cook with cold grease.” Mayweather is confident because he wins. Confidence comes from winning. Self-esteem comes from winning. Optimism comes from having more wins than losses stored in the archive. When the failures outweigh the wins, you cannot have a positive mindset, no matter how many affirmations you say in the mirror.

I once heard a woman in a documentary say that whatever you project into the universe is what comes back to you. I wanted to believe that. I tried the projection thing. I went out of my way to be nice, to make friends, to do right by people, and the goodness did not come back. Meanwhile I’ve watched people project nothing but evil and get adored for it. There are evil men in history with murals painted of them and shows about them on the History Channel. The world gives you back what you look like and what you have. That’s what it projects to you.

And you can’t go back in time and change what’s in the archive. The experiences that got stored at fifteen, at nineteen, at twenty-five, they’re in there for good. What has to happen is this, in the order it actually works. For the mind to change, the reality has to change. For the reality to change, the circumstances have to change. Change comes from the outside in, not the inside out. I don’t believe in telling a person to change their mindset. When the life changes, the mindset will follow on its own.

If it was that simple to change your mind and change your life, don’t you think a lot of people would have changed their lives already? Plenty of people in horrible situations have been thinking positive for decades. The man under the bridge can tell himself he’s a millionaire all day long. If you’re freezing and eating out of the trash can, you need to look at your situation for what it is, baby, because you’re in a real bad situation.

A buddy of mine told me years ago that some people’s lives look like a dark screen, and they stay that way. I thought it was a cold thing to say. There was a lot of validity in it. There is not always a light at the end of the tunnel, and pretending there is one doesn’t put one there. Telling the

man under the bridge to call himself a boss is teaching him not to live in reality. That's not help. That's cruelty with a smile on it.

HOW PEOPLE SEE YOU IS HOW THEY TREAT YOU

Now here's where the archive gets filled. Where do all those experiences come from? They come from how people treat you. And how people treat you comes from how they perceive you.

When Will Smith walked up on that stage and slapped Chris Rock, I wasn't thinking about the joke. I was thinking about who he picked. The way I see it, he picked Chris Rock because he looked at Chris Rock and saw no threat. I don't believe he would have done that to Shannon Sharpe, Dwayne Johnson or Ving Rhames. The way people perceive you is ultimately how they're going to treat you, and that's something I had to understand in my own life. You don't have control over your face, your frame, your size, but all of that is what people size up before you ever open your mouth.

I know this from my own life. A woman once told me I have a baby face. People look at me and assume I'm happy-go-lucky, that I can't get mad, that nothing bothers me. People have told me, "Man, you always seem so happy." That's a front. I've mastered the art of pretending, and I deserve an Academy Award for it. But that perception shapes how people approach me, what they think they can get away with, and what they'll never offer me.

Being too nice has the same effect. All my life people told me I was too nice, and if enough people say something there's probably truth in it. When you're too nice, people think you're dumb, they think you're slow, and they take it as a license to run over you. So now I'm cordial. I keep a serious face in public. I don't go out of my way to befriend anybody. Not because I'm mean, but because my archive is full of what happens when I'm not careful.

Here's the bigger point. If people like how you look, they give you a platform, they give you the benefit of the doubt, they give you chance after chance. Good-looking people get good feedback year after year, and that feedback builds an optimistic outlook. People who got treated with contempt and discarded get a steady diet of bad experiences, and that produces a pessimistic mind.

For a long time I thought something spiritual was working against me. I don't think that anymore. There was no demon at work. The only devil there is is your face. So when somebody tells a rejected man that it's his mindset, I actually agree with him. It is his mindset. Now ask who filled the archive.

DON'T TAKE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR EVERYTHING

One morning I was sitting with my automotive course material, studying before class, and a thought came to me that I haven't been able to shake. Your life is like a movie, and every scene in that movie cultivates who you become. There I was in my thirties, learning a trade because I don't want to be cooking at a hotel forever, and I could see every scene that put me in that chair. Some of those scenes I wrote. Most of them I didn't.

I'd take it one step further than a movie. Life is like a script that's already been written. It was prepared before you came here, and when you came into the world, the script started to run. Some people's script was a good one. Some people's script was a bad one. So when people try to gaslight you into thinking the adversity in your life is your fault, it's not. The script was already written.

That's why I don't judge anybody's personality anymore. Before you start crashing down on a person, just think. You don't know what scenes took place in that man's movie. You don't know what transpired in his life to make him the way he is. Understand first. Most people never make it to the understanding part.

Society loves to put everything on a man. If you've been treated like trash since your teens and you're still in the same spot at thirty or forty, people will tell you it's your fault. Man up. Pull your bootstraps up. Take accountability. I used to believe that. I don't anymore, because most of it is a gaslighting strategy dressed up as advice. It's a shaming tactic. They put the ball back in your court for a situation you never controlled.

Taking accountability for what you can control is manhood. Taking accountability for what you can't control is just letting people beat you up twice. A lot of people like judging the monster, but they don't want to blame what created the monster. It's always easier to blame the victim than to blame society, because society is big and the victim is standing right there.

*Taking accountability for what you can't control is
just letting people beat you up twice.*

So here's my philosophy now, and I know how it sounds. I'm going to take responsibility for the areas of my life I can control, and the areas I can't control, I'm going to blame on God. I didn't choose my face. I didn't choose the family I was born into, my IQ, my ethnicity, or the era I came up in. Those cards were dealt before I was born. Some people were dealt a good deck. Some people got the middle finger. Everybody wasn't dealt the same hand, and anybody who tells you different has only looked at the exceptions. My father taught me to look at the masses.

Did you ask for any of the problems you have in your life? No, you didn't. I didn't ask to be ridiculed. I didn't ask to be the one nobody picked. But understand what all of that does to a man over time. I have trouble sleeping. Some nights I need a beer, a cup of chamomile tea or a glass of champagne before I can get down, and it's bad when a man in his thirties has to drink chamomile tea. That's something old people do. Too

many bad experiences will do that to you. I carry something close to PTSD from what life put in my archive, and I didn't order any of it. To this day I still have to remind myself that it is not my fault that I endured what I endured, and I'm telling you so you can remind yourself too.

Hard work without favor is a recipe for disaster. I've seen lazy men put in less than the bare minimum and win, because they were destined to have it easy. I've seen decent men work three jobs, walk the straight and narrow, pray every night, and still get knocked out. If life wants to apply the blows, you will not escape. We have control to an extent. Believing we are totally in control of our lives is naive. Some dudes got it, some dudes don't, and no amount of man up closes that gap.

So if somebody says your shortcomings come from your mindset and your attitude, tell him to prove it. If he can't prove it, he's writing checks his behind can't cash. As a grown man you don't owe anybody a change of mindset. They can suggest. They can't make you.

RECEIPTS

I talked at the start of this book about being called negative my whole life. Here I want to talk about the tools people reach for when they call you that, and about how you decide whose word to trust.

There's a whole kit of lines they use. "You're just negative." "That's your truth." "I'm not going to entertain negativity." My mother used that last one on me for years. When I'd make a point she couldn't answer, that was her way out. She wasn't refusing negativity, she was refusing a truth that held weight. When I talk about how women really are, she has another one ready: "You just don't know how to talk to women." That's shaming language. And "that's your truth" is the same move. It's a way to shut you down without ever refuting what you said. When a person has to shut you down instead of answering you, that tells you who won.

I'll say this once and plain: positive people are delusional, negative people are realistic. I know how that sounds to people raised the way I

was raised. But look at the world. Look at the news. Look at what people gravitate to. Make a song about morals and good deeds and see who buys it. My father told me you can't be positive in a negative world. So-called negative people are more honest than positive people, and the longer I live the more I believe it. They're just the ones who have stopped pretending.

Now, how do you know who to believe, me or the people calling me negative? Receipts. My father never wrote checks he couldn't cash. Everything he ever told me, he can back up. He's the man who fought his own brother, when I was eleven, over the truth he was telling me, and I'd take one man like that over a house full of pretty lies. It hurt sometimes, but I had one person who kept it real from day one, and I feel sorry for every man who only had people lying to him.

My mother was the opposite; she once told me lying is sometimes permissible. When we'd debate, I'd tell her, if you feel what you're saying is right, prove it, put your money where your mouth is. She never could. She'd just say, "That's not true," to things she knew were true, and eventually I stopped having those conversations, because would you argue with a crazy person? No. You let them state their piece and you keep moving.

That's my rule now with everybody. When you know the truth is the truth, you don't have to argue with people. If you know the sky is blue and somebody insists it's purple, there's nothing to debate. You can put all the factual evidence in front of some people and they will still believe whatever comforts them. So I don't try to convince anybody of the truth anymore. Regardless of what a person may say or believe, life is going to tell them what it is. Time tells all. Gavel slam, case closed. Since I hit my thirties I don't let anybody, my own mother included, tell me my perception of life is wrong, and my confidence has grown more in these years than in all the years before them.

DENYING IT DOESN'T CHANGE IT

There's a difference between not knowing something and knowing it and refusing to admit it. Not knowing is innocent. The second one, in my opinion, is a mental illness.

Denying something you know is true does not change the reality of that thing. It's like I know two times two is four, and you want to stand there and deny that it's four when you know it's four. That's idiotic. And I don't just say that about strangers. I say it about my own mother, who I believe knows deep down that my grandparents and my father were right about almost everything, and whose pride and ego will not let her say it.

*Denying something you know is true does not change
the reality of that thing.*

The psychologists call it cognitive dissonance: the discomfort you feel when the facts in front of you clash with what you believe. A lot of people make that discomfort go away by holding on to the belief and throwing out the facts. Tell yourself a lie enough times and it becomes your truth, the same way a dancer rehearses choreography until the body does it without thinking. Some people have rehearsed a lie so long in their head that they can't find the truth in there anymore.

Why do people do it? Because the truth is brutal and lies are comforting. People who deny things they know are true are cowards, comfortable living a lie because facing what's in front of them is too much. People who like being delusional are people who are afraid of reality. Those same people will call you negative for living in it. Ask them how they can live their whole life scared.

Here's where I stand, and you can take it or leave it. I'd rather know the painful truth and be miserable. That's just me. A man is not supposed to be delusional. A man is supposed to look at reality for what it is, even when it hurts, because he can only deal with what he's willing to see.

And it starts with yourself. You can lie to the world, but you can't lie to yourself. Do an honest assessment. If your life has had more bad in it than good, then your life has been bad. Admit it. My mother says her life is great, and I've watched her life, and it has been a living hell. That's self-deception, and it doesn't protect her, it just keeps her stuck. When you're honest with yourself, you get direction. You start to see what's actually in your control and what isn't. Lying to yourself never does anything for you long-term except guarantee you'll be forty or fifty years old still telling the same lie.

I'll add this for the men who think they're being tough by staying silent: there's nothing wrong with admitting life dealt you a bad hand. Admitting it isn't weakness. It's the only honest starting point there is.

QUESTION WHAT YOU WERE TAUGHT

Here's a question that still scares some people when I ask it. What if the stuff you've been believing for years, the things you were taught, what if all of that is a lie?

Kids believe what they're told. That's what kids do. But once you're an adult with a brain of your own, you can decide what makes sense and what doesn't. Don't just believe something because someone told you. Deciding for yourself is what makes you an intelligent person, not the degree on the wall. A buddy of mine put it plain: running with a claim that has no factual evidence behind it is low IQ.

I had to question the thing I was raised in most of all. I grew up saturated in Christianity. I believed that if I was a good boy and a man of God, there'd be a reward for me in this life. There wasn't. I got taken advantage of, done wrong, and eaten alive, and when I came up out of it I

understood something my grandparents had told me when I was a little boy: “Son, all that church stuff is a game.” I didn’t hear them then. I hear them now.

I walked away from church in 2017, when I was twenty-eight, and I’ve never regretted it. I still believe in God. I just use my brain now.

My father gave me the test I use for everything now. “If it don’t make sense, then it’s probably some nonsense.” Apply it to the preacher, the dating coach, the self-help book, the motivational clip. Apply it to your parents. Your parents don’t know everything. Mine didn’t. My grandparents got a lot right, more than anybody, and I still question some of what they taught me, because no one knows everything.

Understand what being lied to does to you. It’s like being handed the wrong test answers by someone who knows the right ones. You fail, and you don’t even know why you failed. I didn’t know looks mattered to women until my late twenties. I thought believing in Jesus and having a nice personality was enough, because that’s what church and the people around me told me. A buddy of mine put me on to the truth, something he’d always known, and I was behind by a decade because of it. Being in a bad position is one thing. Being lied to about why is a whole different can of worms.

So who do you listen to? That’s the other half of questioning. My father told me you end up like whoever you take advice and instruction from. My father’s buddy said consider the source. My father said if they’re broke, don’t listen to them about money. How is somebody who doesn’t have what you want going to tell you how to get it? I’ve listened to the wrong people, and it put me in bad situations I’m lucky to have walked out of.

People used to say I never listen. That’s not it. I’m selective. The only people I’ve ever truly taken instruction from are my father and my grandparents, because they could back up every word. When I open my mouth on camera, I’m like a tape recorder repeating everything that’s

been instilled in me over the years. That's the archive too. I'm not just a record of what happened to me, I'm a record of who I chose to listen to.

THE REAL CRIME IS TO REMAIN IGNORANT

My father's best friend gave me a saying years ago and I want to give it to you. "There's no crime in being ignorant. It's to remain ignorant. Remember that." For a long time I was ashamed to admit when I didn't know something. That saying is what got me over it.

I was ignorant about a lot. At nineteen, on my first date, I ended up in a girl's bed and was too green to understand what the invitation meant. I believed women cared about personality and soul until I was grown. I ran my mouth to strangers, struck up conversations with people I had no business talking to, and gave the benefit of the doubt to people who were secretly against me. I could have been deleted several times over. None of that was a crime. I was young and nobody had told me.

Don't beat yourself up for being slow and dumb at fifteen. Don't beat yourself up for being slow and dumb at twenty-one. Life is a never-ending learning journey. It's like climbing the levels in a fighting game: you go from novice to mid level to master, and it gets harder as you go up the ranks, but you're supposed to be getting better at it. It's like chess. You learn from the mistakes, and then you make the right moves. Only a fool thinks he knows everything. At thirty-six I'm still learning, and I'm reading more than I ever have, which is something my father stressed from the beginning. He just put me on *The Canterbury Tales*.

But once you've learned, stand on it. Once you're thirty and over, you don't need anybody's approval. You don't need anybody's applause. You've been alive long enough to understand your own life, and nobody who hasn't lived it can tell you about it. Life gave some people champagne, and life gave some people a whole lot of pain. You cannot explain your pain to somebody who's had champagne their whole life. They'll gaslight you to the end, not always out of malice, just because

they can't feel what they've never felt. So talk to people who have your same demons. Don't cast your pearls in front of people who'll only ridicule them.

The way people have treated you, everything you've been through, that's the proof. That's the archive. Open it up and read it honestly, and you'll know more about your situation than any coach, any preacher, or any relative with an opinion.

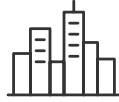
My mother gave me one piece of advice I'll carry, as much as we disagree. She told me not to measure my smartness by school. I had academic challenges. I was never a whiz kid, and I have an uncle who was gifted with the books without a single tutor, so for years I thought that meant I wasn't smart. But understanding people, reading energy, knowing exactly why you are where you are in life, that's a brilliance too, and it's the kind that keeps you alive. If you understand why you're in the position you're in, pat yourself on the back. You're smart. You can have a college degree and still be a fool.

My grandmother tells me she knew from the time I was a child that I was bright and had great potential. Potential has to be cultivated by the people raising you, and mine wasn't, not fully. I don't beat myself up over that anymore. I'm cultivating it myself now, late, in an automotive classroom with grease on my hands, with the books my father told me to read, with these conversations. Better late than never. The crime was never in not knowing. It would only be a crime if I stayed there.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ Your mind is an archive, and it plays back what life recorded on it, not what you wish was there.
- ☛ Confidence comes from the wins stored in that archive, and you can't cook with cold grease.
- ☛ How people perceive you is how they will treat you, and that treatment is what fills your archive.
- ☛ Don't judge a man's attitude until you know the scenes that played in his movie.
- ☛ Take responsibility for what you can control and refuse the blame for what you can't.
- ☛ When somebody answers you with "that's your truth," he has stopped arguing and started dodging.
- ☛ Never argue with someone who denies what he knows is true; let him state his piece and keep moving.
- ☛ Question what you were taught, even when it came from people who loved you.
- ☛ Don't be ashamed of what you didn't know at fifteen; be ashamed only if you refuse to learn it now.



CHAPTER TWELVE

IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF THE WORLD



“Growing up going to church I used to hear ‘I’m in the world but not of the world.’ If you’re in the world, you are of the world. That doesn’t make any sense.”

In 2008 I was nineteen years old, and a coworker of mine from Maryland, a guy I used to go clubbing with, took me out one night. We were sitting in his car in the parking lot and I had on a Lacoste polo, some jeans, white Air Force Ones and a Braves cap. Clean. Nothing crazy. He looked me over, said my shirt was fine, and then reached in the back and handed me a different shirt to put on. He felt some kind of way about that Lacoste. It was not hood enough for where we were going. If I had shown up in a white tee, sagging jeans and Jordans, he wouldn’t have said a word. I put the other shirt on. I was nineteen and I wanted to fit in.

He also told me not to tell anybody at work that we hung out, and one night he left me sitting in that car while he went inside. I didn’t tell that story for years, and when I finally did, I realized I still felt

disrespected by it. Today I'd tell him to get lost. Back then I changed my shirt.

That shirt is the whole chapter, guys. I grew up in the suburbs of Atlanta, in church, raised mostly by my grandparents and around my father's side of the family, and from middle school on I was told in a hundred different ways that the way I talked, the way I dressed and the way I carried myself was wrong for a Black man. Not wrong for a person. Wrong for a brother. In high school a dude told me he wouldn't wear anything I wore, and all I had on was a Sean John T-shirt, a track jacket and some shell-toe Adidas. Another one told me I was "a white boy trapped in a Black boy's body." I was offended at the time. Now I understand he was giving me a compliment.

I'm thirty-six now. I've spent most of my adult life trying to figure out why the culture I was born into kept telling me I was doing it wrong, and I've come to some conclusions. Some of them are bitter. All of them are what I've seen with my own eyes, as a man from the suburbs who cooks in a hotel kitchen six days a week, is finishing an automotive program on the side, and has watched for years who gets respect and who gets laughed at.

YOU CAN'T FAKE WHERE YOU COME FROM

Let me be honest about something first. I tried. I already told you about my bandana phase at eleven and the hood documentaries I watched as a teenager, imagining that life was mine. I grew up in the suburbs on the straight and narrow, and every time I tried to be something else, it was acting. Acting gets tiring when it's not you.

The music was around me from the start. My grandmother bought me Nelly's *St. Lunatics* album and the edited version of Lil Wayne's *Lights Out* when I was eleven or twelve. My father gave me a DMX album at eight. My stepmother gave me a Cash Money album in 2003, when I was in the eighth grade. So I'm not somebody who grew up in a

bubble with no rap in the house. I loved it. But I was never from the environment that music was describing. I never lived in the projects a day in my life. The men I grew up around on my father's side wore shirts and ties and penny loafers, read books and valued education. Most people in the culture would call them sellouts. My father told me, "You are what you come from," and I got it honestly.

Here is what my little phase taught me. You can't be something that you're not. If you weren't raised in the hood around gangsters, you can try to pretend, but it's never going to be official. People can smell it. The dudes who really came from that element knew I wasn't one of them, and the ones who faked it looked just as silly as I did.

My grandmother told me my whole childhood to stay away from urban areas. Nothing good happens there, she said; the only thing that happens there is getting your head cracked. I didn't understand her when I was a kid. As a teenager I went skating at Skate Town on Old National, at Cascade near Bankhead and at Golden Glide, and I saw fights break out more than once. I understand her now. People will tell you that keeping your distance is running from your people. My answer has always been the same. Don't let anybody shame you or tell you you're running from your culture. At least you won't be dead.

That's the honest reason I hang out in Johns Creek, Alpharetta, Dunwoody and Buckhead when I can. It's not that I think I'm better. It's that anywhere predominantly urban I have ever gone, I had to watch my back, and the older I get the thinner my tolerance for that energy gets. If you know it's mayhem in the jungle, there's no need in going to the jungle. I'd rather be at a wine bar in a blazer with a glass of Pinot Blanc and some Kenny G playing, and I'm not going to apologize for that.

EITHER YOU'RE A HOOD DUDE OR YOU'RE A NERD

My own mother told me I talk white. She said it because I pronounce my words, and to her ear that was a problem. I checked her on that one. You didn't raise me in the hood, I told her, so why would I talk hood?

She wasn't the only one. I already told you about the first sister I took on a date at nineteen, who decided I was soft before the food came. Other women later told me my voice sounded "fruity" because I speak properly. A woman at work recently assumed I was a preacher. I'm standing there thinking, that's code for loser. No wonder she's not looking at me.

What I eventually understood is that for a brother, in the culture I came up in, there are only two categories you can be in and get respect. You can be a pretty boy, a Chris Brown or a Prince type, which most of us are not. Or you can be a hood dude. In the Black community, you can't be different. I learned that the hard way. A brother in the middle, clean-cut, with some style, educated, not from the trenches, gets labeled a nerd, a preacher, a cornball.

Look at who gets called square. Russell Wilson is reportedly worth well over a hundred million dollars, married Ciara in 2016, and has helped raise her oldest son as his own, and in 2014 a Bleacher Report column claimed some of his own Seahawks teammates felt he wasn't "Black enough," a claim Wilson and other players pushed back on. Michael B. Jordan won the Best Actor Oscar in 2026 for *Sinners*, put in the work, took no shortcuts, and I've still seen people in our own community call him corny and a nerd. It reached all the way into my own family; even people who love me had their jokes about men like him. Why does a Black man have to be a lame because he's not a thug?

Meanwhile I watched a woman on a dating show, thirty-nine years old, pop her balloon on a well-dressed man because he looked like he reads books. She wanted to turn up. At thirty-nine. As a brother, if you're

reading books, if you're doing things to expand your IQ and edify yourself, that's seen as corny. My father pushed me and my stepbrother to read when we were boys, and that's the reason I read today. In the culture, that makes me suspect.

I'll put it the clearest way I know. Being from the hood, being from the trenches, serving time in prison, having bodies under your belt: in the culture, that's like having a PhD. That's like having a degree from Cornell University. That's what gets you cool points with other men and, in my experience, with most of the women I came across, including the educated ones. I've seen a man come home from prison and get a party with champagne, balloons and rose petals like he just graduated from Harvard. I've never seen the grill and the pecan pie come out for a college graduate. You can't go to the grocery store and purchase food with street credibility. But in the culture I came up around, it's worth more than a diploma.

Here's an image I use. Picture two brothers side by side. One in sagging sweatpants, Jordans, dreads, tattoos, bullet wounds. One in a Zegna silk shirt, Rag & Bone jeans, white Air Force Ones and an Atlanta Braves fitted. Ask yourself honestly which one gets more respect walking into a room full of our people. You already know the answer, and that answer is the power of image. I think image is more important for brothers than for any other group of men I've been around, and the image we're asked to fit is the one most likely to put you in prison or the graveyard. That's not a culture. That's a trap with a soundtrack.

*You can't go to the grocery store and purchase food
with street credibility.*

A buddy of mine in Dallas noticed something before I did. Nearly every man you see online complaining about being ostracized, alone and

overlooked is a brother. You don't see men of other backgrounds complaining about it in abundance. A man named John told me at twenty-one that my attitude was the problem. It wasn't. It was the culture, and the one identity it allows. If I were not a brother, I never would have had a lot of the negative experiences in my life. That's why I'm not beating myself up anymore, and you shouldn't either. Stop beating yourself up over things that were not your fault.

RAP IS NOT JUST MUSIC FOR US

I don't say this as somebody who hates rap. I grew up on it. The LOX, Cash Money, Master P, the Ruff Ryders, Styles P. I watched BET like it was school. But I've noticed something as a grown man. When other groups of people listen to that music, they bob their heads and then go back to their lives, their businesses, their families. For us it became a way of life. For a Black man, rap is not just music. You have to become the rap video. You have to become the gangster rap song. You have to look like you're from the projects even if you've never seen the projects.

My stepfather was overly religious, and when I was a teenager he used to confiscate my rap CDs. I thought he was being funny. My real father wasn't religious and didn't care what I listened to. Now, as a man, I see what my stepfather saw. Whatever you listen to over and over gets in your spirit. A sixty-two-year-old man told me rap music was the worst thing that ever happened to our community, and I didn't argue with him. I read the lyrics to a popular song not long ago and it was nothing but scamming, robbing and a life of crime, and parents let little kids sing along to it. Then they're surprised when the son grows up to be a gangster.

What that music did is reset the standard. The standard for a Black man used to be Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X. Men in suits. Then it became a rapper, and once the standard moved, everything moved with it: how you dress, how you talk, who gets respected, who gets

chosen, who gets called a sellout. My grandfather was disgusted by young men sagging their pants. He loved jazz and dressed conservatively his whole life, and I've always felt I should have belonged to his generation instead of mine.

These days I mostly listen to R&B, jazz and classical. I fall asleep to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. My father is the one who opened that door. He listens to heavy metal and country, Mozart and Chopin, and he put me onto Kenny Chesney and Tim McGraw. The man dresses like a cowboy. That tells you how far my father's side of the family is from the culture, and I came out the same way. In my mind, I'm Kenny Chesney. Country music tells a story, and it's mostly positive. People in the culture think that's lame. I think rap keeps you in a box, in one mentality, and I'm proud of myself for being open-minded enough to step out of it.

THE HIVE MIND

Not long ago, in my automotive class, I told some guys about an Israeli restaurant I'd tried the day before. Hummus, a lamb and beef burger, good food. An older man in the class looked at me sarcastically and said I needed to "do some studying." If I had said Popeyes or Church's he wouldn't have said a word. Trying a different cuisine is how you grow and how you learn, and in that room it made me suspect.

That's the hive. The thing I came to hate most wasn't the hood itself. It was the hive: the pressure to all think the same way, dress the same way, value the same things, and attack anybody who steps outside the line. Why is it so important to another man what I'm wearing or what I'm eating? He's not wearing it. He's not eating it.

I met the hive early. In sixth grade I went to a school run by a man who was pro-Black out of this world. The teaching was all about learning from the past to build the future, and what he actually taught us was that every other ethnicity was the enemy. I call that foolishness now. What I've seen since is that the people who clowned my clothes, my voice and my

taste looked just like me. Nobody from another group ever made me change my shirt in a parking lot.

I had a buddy who used to tell me that whenever people treated me badly, it was “Satan and his minions.” I made the same excuse for years. I don’t anymore. People size you up on sight and decide how they’re going to treat you, and that’s free will, not demons. Blaming the devil just gives them a pass.

It’s the same thing I saw in middle school and high school, when everybody was trying to assimilate even if they stuck out. The difference is that in my community I never saw it end. The world is one big high school. People can tell when you’re not in tune with the program, and they go out of their way to let you know. Talk about gloom and doom and they salute you. Mention learning the stock market or starting a business and you’re lame and they tear you down. Being dumb is celebrated in the urban community. It’s a badge of honor, like graduating *summa cum laude*.

And if you say any of this out loud, you get the label. Sellout. Uncle Tom. Negative. Crazy. My father got called crazy his whole life for saying the truth out loud, and so have I. When you tell the truth and don’t sugarcoat it, people don’t like you because you’re too real, and they’re too fake to handle it. I’ve made my peace with the label. If I’m a sellout for refusing to adapt to a culture that celebrates degeneracy, then I’ll just be a sellout.

What I’d say to a young brother raised the way I was raised is simple. How you were groomed is how you were groomed. Don’t be ashamed of it. You don’t have to fit in. You don’t have to assimilate to anything. If somebody has to have you dress a certain way and talk a certain way before they’ll be cool with you, you don’t need that friend. And if the culture calls you square for that, remember what square buys you: your freedom and your life.

THE AGE OF FAKERY

A viewer in his thirties asked me once how things were before social media. I told him the truth: the 90s were an impeccable time to be a kid. Toys, movies, music, playing outside. MySpace showed up when I was a teenager, then Facebook, and ride-share didn't exist until I had just turned twenty. So I lived both sides. People were nicer before. When you were out and about in the 90s and early 2000s, people spoke to you. Now it's like they see you, but they don't see you. Everybody is in their own bubble, in a trance, stressed about money, and the littlest thing sets them off.

What social media did was take the superficial stuff that was always there and put it on steroids. Girls were shallow when I was a teenager too, and the ones I knew liked thugs then too. But it wasn't in your face every second of the day. Now it's vanity pushed into your eyes from the moment you wake up, and people are yearning for validation, yearning for the approval of strangers. A man paid Chris Brown \$1,200 to take a picture with him. Twelve hundred dollars to stand next to another man. You can like a man's talent and his music, but when it turns into worshiping him like he's God, you've gone too far.

I know, because I did it. I admired Diddy's hustle growing up. My grandmother bought me Sean John at Macy's and Burlington Coat Factory, and I still have some of it from my teenage years. Then it came out. Cassie Ventura sued him in November 2023 and they settled the next day. In May 2024 CNN aired 2016 hotel video of him attacking her, and he apologized. In July 2025 a federal jury acquitted him of sex trafficking and racketeering but convicted him on two prostitution-related transportation counts, and that October he was sentenced to 50 months. I understood I had been admiring the wrong person. Those clothes are going to the Salvation Army. You can admire these people for their talent and their hustle, but don't worship them like they're God.

They're not gods. They're human beings with skeletons in the closet like everybody else.

The fakery shows up at funerals too. Watch who gets up and speaks beautifully about a man they ignored while he was alive. People who had nothing good to say to you for thirty years will conjure up a whole story once you're in the ground. Why not give a person their flowers while they're alive and well and in good health? That's the time to give flowers. If you don't have anything good to say to me now, don't make something up when I'm gone.

KARMA RUNS BACKWARDS

I cook in a kitchen every day, Tuesday through Sunday, and I still get told I'm not working hard enough. My grandparents raised me on the rule that a man is supposed to be productive. So I'm productive. And I've watched men with nothing going for them, living in a woman's house, playing video games and smoking all day, get more props and praise than a man who goes to work every day, because they've got a woman and he doesn't. Nobody cares about your Movado watch, your Zegna cologne or your fettuccine and steak if nobody is sitting next to you. The world is very unforgiving of those who don't meet the standard. I could put that on a T-shirt.

I wrote a song about it instead. I called it "Nobody Cares About a Man," and it's one of the realest things I've ever put together. When you're a man, you're on your own. Nobody is concerned about your well-being; some of my own relatives don't call just to see if I'm alive. What I've seen is that a woman can have the nastiest attitude in the room and still get catered to, while a man gets put under the microscope the minute he walks in. A man is supposed to lead, so when a relationship or a marriage falls apart, it's the man's fault before anybody asks a question. And as a brother, unless you were a gangster or a drug dealer, nobody is going to paint a mural of you on the back of a building when you're

gone. That's the pressure. You're expected to hold it all together, and you get no room for error. If a man crashes out and acts a fool, he goes to prison or somebody takes him out, and nobody has any sympathy for him either way. So you keep your issues together, because there's nobody standing underneath you to catch you.

The kitchen taught me what all of this adds up to, because it's bigger than one culture. My grandparents told me as a little boy that if I was good, did the right thing and believed in God, everything would be added unto me. Then I started watching who actually got honored in this world, and it wasn't the good people. Society looks at evil as being strong. Society looks at being good, being humble, as being weak. The people at the top of the hierarchy, in my experience, are not people of morality. They're people with looks, money or status, those three pillars again, and if you don't have one of them, you're going to struggle.

My grandparents' principles were not bad principles. They helped me with my schoolwork, they kept me on the straight and narrow, and I give them credit for that. Their principles just don't fit this place. I was applying good to evil and wondering why it wasn't working, and once I saw that, years of frustration finally made sense. Here's a thought experiment I like. Land a helicopter in front of a grocery store, step out in a blazer and loafers, and watch the respect people give you. Nobody asks about your character. Nobody asks if you go to church.

A buddy of mine in LA used to say that some people are going to suffer until the day they die. When he first said it, I thought he was being mean. Now I know he was just being real. I used to believe karma came back around. I don't anymore. I've watched wicked people prosper with no punishment and decent people get walked over for being decent. Bad karma gets you good karma, and good karma gets you bad karma. It's the reverse. Kindness reads as softness, and softness reads as permission. Having a kind personality is what got me taken advantage of. My grandmother always said you give people what they give you, and it took me until my thirties to listen.

Bad karma gets you good karma, and good karma gets you bad karma.

Equality is part of the same lie. My father told me years ago, “Some people are better than some people.” He said humans are not equal and I would see it in how people are treated. He was absolutely right. I saw it when a girl in my math class told me her father doesn’t like people of my complexion. I see it every time somebody is born into money. The president’s kids will never have to work as hard as yours. People only associate with people on their level. Equality is just a figment of your imagination, a gaslighting strategy society wanted us to believe. The one thing that saved me from losing my mind over my own life is that I had a father who told me the brutal truth about this world instead of a fairy tale.

Now, I want to be clear about one thing. Understanding that the world rewards evil does not mean I’m telling you to become evil. Just because society values evil more than decency, that doesn’t mean you adapt to evil. You can say the hell with society. Stay decent. Keep your good heart. But understand the game, so you stop being angry and start moving your chess pieces accordingly. If I had kids I would tell them it’s fine to be a good person, and I would also tell them that nobody is going to reward them for it, so they don’t walk into their twenties as blind as I did.

WHAT WOULD MARTIN SAY

My mother put civil rights leaders on my bedroom wall when I was a kid. Marcus Garvey, Shirley Chisholm, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, right next to my solar system and my dinosaurs. Whatever she

and I disagree about now, she gave me that, and I grew up looking at those faces. Martin Luther King went to Morehouse. He dressed conservatively, he wore a suit, he wanted peace. That's my temperament exactly. I've thought many times that I was born in the wrong era, and I can see myself in a suit and oxfords working alongside a man like that.

So ask yourself how he'd feel walking through the culture today. Ski masks, double cups, face tattoos, gang music, a whole mural in Chicago honoring a drill rapper. A buddy of mine pointed out something years ago that I can't unsee: "Any street that's named after MLK, any school that's named after Martin Luther King, why is it such a bad and violent place?" I think the man would be disgusted. And I think, and this is the sad part, that the culture would reject him for it. He'd be called a square, a sellout, corny, the same thing they call Russell Wilson, because he wouldn't conform.

My grandfather told me when I was a kid that too many of us don't like each other, and that's why we stay at war with each other. My own family proves him right; you already know we only see each other at funerals. In the segregation days, melanated people were more unified when we were oppressed than we are today, and it shouldn't be that way. Back then brothers had class and sisters had class. If we were unified like that today, with education and a collared shirt considered cool, we'd be unstoppable. I don't expect it to happen. In the culture, conflict resolution is loading up the steel. Not agreeing to disagree, not seeing things from a different perspective, not walking away. How are we going to complain about how other people treat us when we don't treat each other right?

So here is my proposal, and I know it sounds crazy to the hive. Being from the suburbs needs to be the new standard. A clean-cut, conservative, educated brother, a Kevin Samuels type, should be the norm instead of the thug, the D-boy and the headbuster. If being suburban were considered cool, young men would get their act together, young women would raise the bar, and the fruit of the culture would change. Once

you're thirty, forty, fifty, it's time to hang up that I'm-trying-to-be-a-gangster jersey. A man of forty-five in sweatpants and Jordans still talking about who's the hardest looks like a clown, and he's teaching the next generation to be clowns. There's a time for baggy clothes and a do-rag, and it's a rap concert, not Ruth's Chris.

I'll end it where I always end it. We got enough hood culture. We need some elegant culture. Cognac, jazz, a well-cut blazer, a book in your hand, your head on straight. People in the culture will say that's lame. I say it's the only version of being in the world that doesn't ask you to become something that will kill you.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ You can't fake where you come from, so stop trying to be a street dude when you were raised in a cul-de-sac.
- ☛ If the culture only gives you two options, pretty boy or hood dude, refuse both and build your own lane.
- ☛ Street credibility won't buy groceries, won't get you a job and won't keep you out of a cell.
- ☛ Rap is entertainment for everybody else and a lifestyle for us, so watch what you let into your spirit.
- ☛ The hive will call you a sellout for leveling up; take the label and keep climbing.
- ☛ Admire a celebrity's talent if you want, but never worship a man like he's God.
- ☛ Give people their flowers while they're alive, and don't make up stories at anybody's funeral.
- ☛ Your grandparents' rules can be good and still not fit this place, so stop waiting for your decency to get paid back.
- ☛ Equality was never real, and the sooner you stop believing in it the sooner you stop blaming yourself.
- ☛ Stay decent anyway, and make elegance the standard instead of the hood.



PART SEVEN



LIVING ANYWAY

“We’re getting out the house.”



MY GRANDMOTHER



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TURN YOUR PAIN INTO CHAMPAGNE



*“Most people are toasted to success. But you know what? We
going to toast to our pain.”*

My father gave me a bottle of Perrier-Jouët Grand Brut. Golden color, floral on the nose with a little brioche behind it, pear and apple when you smell it, dry on the tongue, and a finish that hangs around for a while. Truth be told, I’m not a fan of dry champagne. I like something a little sweeter, something with more personality. But I sat down with that bottle, poured a glass, held it up to the camera, and asked the question everybody asks when they’ve got a flute in their hand. What are we going to toast to?

Most people toast to success. We don’t have a lot of that in this corner of the world. God really poured out his champagne on some people, and the rest of us have to pour our own. So I toast to a life of hell. I toast to the pain. I love champagne because it’s the epitome of elegance. There is something about taking the ugliest thing in your life and pouring it into

the most elegant glass you can find. Turn your pain into champagne, baby. That's the whole chapter right there.

There is something about taking the ugliest thing in your life and pouring it into the most elegant glass you can find.

Now understand what I am not saying. I'm not here to paint a picture of a false positivity. I've spent a lot of this book telling you the truth as I've seen it: life is not fair, most people are not happy, and some of us got dealt a hand that is never going to get much better. I'm not taking any of that back. But who wants to be gloom and doom all the time? We know our situation is bad. We still have to get up in the morning.

So this chapter is about what I actually do between the bad days. The dancing, the walks, the wine bars, the cologne, the salmon in the oven, the glass of something good at the end of the night. None of it fixes the circumstance. What it does is turn the hell down a few notches, and later in this book I'll show you the hell meter I use to measure exactly that.

WE'RE GETTING OUT THE HOUSE

My grandmother, my father's mother, never believed in sitting around the house. My grandparents pretty much groomed me and raised me, and the thing they instilled in me more than anything was that you have to get out, explore, and live life. She had one line she said all the time: "We're getting out the house." She had another one too: "An idle mind is the devil's workshop." I heard that my whole childhood, and now I understand it.

A lot of men in my position are sitting in purgatory staring at a wall. They've been rejected so many times that they've barricaded themselves

inside, and I get it, because solitude is what everybody recommends for guys like us. But I'm telling you from experience: isolating yourself and barricading yourself, that ain't the way to live. Get out. Do something. When you're not doing anything with yourself and you just sit around, that is the easiest way for the devil to come into your life.

Let me tell you what getting out looks like for me. One Sunday before Christmas it meant a wine bar up in Alpharetta, and I'll tell you that whole story later in this book. Another time I went to P.F. Chang's in Dunwoody, a ritzy part of north Georgia. I hadn't been since 2019, and it was nothing like the frozen dinners. Lettuce wraps, chicken fried rice, and a Dark and Stormy, rum and ginger beer, which is fitting, because a lot of men in these positions, their life is dark and stormy. Then a French 75, Moët & Chandon and lemon in a champagne flute, a drink I have to credit Usher for putting me onto. I walked out of there on cloud nine, past a waterfall, and rode the escalator down to the men's floor at Nordstrom just to look at a \$645 Hugo Boss blazer. Stuff like that ought to motivate you to put in some work. Sometimes all it takes is getting out, getting something good to eat, having your two drinks, and you'll be feeling amazing.

And it doesn't have to cost anything. I've had days where all I did was take a walk with a bottle of water and the whole day turned around. Being at one with nature, feeling the sun beam on you a bit, that can be enough to brighten your day. The little things in life can make you feel somewhat better in the middle of a bad one: a turkey sandwich and a bag of Cape Cod sea salt and cracked pepper chips, a movie, an hour at the skating rink. I remember telling the camera I felt good and I hadn't even had a shot of tequila. You don't need a shot of gin or vodka to feel good. You need to get out the house.

Here's the part men miss. I don't go out to hunt for women. I went to a wine tasting spot one afternoon, classical music playing, an old-fashioned made with Jameson and a Calabrian chicken pasta, and I ended up vibing with a woman I never went there to meet. From the way she

talked, she had dealt with her share of headbusters in her younger days and wanted a more decent caliber of man now, and we threw around ideas like biking, golf, skating, a sip and paint. Sometimes when you're just living your life and you're not expecting anything, that's when things come to you. I didn't get my hopes up, because that's how you set yourself up for disappointment. But I think we men spend too much time focusing on women and not enough time just living our lives and doing our thing.

A HIT OF DOPAMINE

People ask me how I can dance and smile on camera when I'm the same man telling you the world is a hell realm. Here's the answer. My dance videos are an outlet for me. They're an escape, like a hit of dopamine, and a relief from this hell realm. They're also the best exercise I know for trimming the waistline. Smile when you inhale, smile when you're going through turmoil, smile when you're going through pain. That's not denial. That's what you do with pain when you don't have anywhere else to put it.

I've been active my whole life, and I thank my family for that. As a teenager I went skating all the time. I swam laps at the recreation center, because water is therapy. I took karate as a kid, played rec basketball with my stepbrother, and played a season of football the year I lived with my father. In my early twenties the gym was how I handled the emotional turmoil I was in. Now I'm back in it, and when I walk out of there it feels like a load was lifted.

I got a noon workout in on Black Friday, on a treadmill, talking to the camera, because when you're living a life of hell a workout is a getaway. Whatever it is, a bike, tennis, golf, jogging, swimming, find it. I've even thought about joining an adult swim team. Life can't just be go to work and come home. You've got to find some kind of outlet.

So why do I keep going, when I've already told you the gym is not going to change where I stand with women? Because sitting around makes me dwell on everything I've been through, and the gym gets my mind off it. I'm not doing what I'm doing for the approval of women. I'm doing it for my own well-being. That's the only reason that lasts. Life is not a game. You only get one life to live, and you've got to make the best of it.

I AM PASSIONATE ABOUT ELEGANCE

If there's one thing in life I can say I'm passionate about, it's elegance. My grandmother used to spray Acqua di Giò on me when I was a kid, and my grandfather wore it too. He loved jazz and dressed conservatively. By twenty-three or twenty-four I was wearing Armani Code heavy. You already know about my stacks of GQ and Esquire. Some things about you can't be changed, and I stopped wanting to change this one a long time ago.

Let me tell you about the fragrances, because this is where my enthusiasm gets away from me. In 2014 I sampled Tom Ford Noir de Noir at Neiman Marcus, and it was love at first try. To me it smells like being a boss. I still only own a sample, because these fragrances aren't cheap, and I still love it. In 2019, same store, I sprayed Baccarat Rouge 540 for the first time: saffron and jasmine up top, amberwood and ambergris underneath, and to me it smells like elegantly salted candied apples. Love at first sight. If wealth and affluence had a scent, that would be it. Somebody overheard me talking about it and gifted me the small bottle for my birthday, and I'm not ashamed to tell you how much that meant.

Retail was a few hundred dollars for the small bottle and close to a thousand for the big one when I got mine, and who pays that much for a fragrance unless you're rich? So shop around. I've seen the small bottle for around \$100 on eBay and Mercari. Get a sample for little or nothing

before you buy. I'm just getting started in the fragrance game, and my collection is small, but every bottle in it does something for me. Even in your darkest hour, even on your saddest day, a bottle like that will uplift your spirits. That's the point. I don't wear it for women. Cologne will not make a woman want you if she doesn't already. Whatever you do as a man, you do it for your own peace and gratification, because your peace and your mental health is all that matters.

Then there's the clothes. A lot of designer stuff is just a name stamped on cheap material, and you don't have to be dripping in designer to look nice. My festive Christmas shirt came from Target. But there are brands where the price buys real craftsmanship, and if I were ever on that level, Ermenegildo Zegna is where I'd put my money. An \$890 linen T-shirt, a cashmere blazer, quiet elegance. I even had a seamstress make neckties out of fabric I picked myself, and I still dream about a suit line for the everyday working gentleman who wants to look like wealth for a fraction of the price.

Elegance shows up in my kitchen too. One Wednesday night I baked salmon stuffed with ricotta and spinach over mashed potatoes and sat there thinking a glass of Veuve Clicquot would complete it. Another night I made a spinach and salmon Alfredo from scratch: garlic browned in butter, heavy cream, parmesan whisked until it's thick, rigatoni. These kinds of gourmet meals can make a bad situation a good one. I'll be honest that there's a sad side too. Some meals should be enjoyed with a significant other. Cooking is romantic when you really think about it, and it can make you very depressed. I cook them anyway. The meal is still good.

My music changed the same way. These days I fall asleep to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, jazz, harp music. I even started writing songs again like I did as a teenager, using an app that puts a voice on them. I wrote a whole song about a Frederic Malle fragrance. You know you're a fragrance enthusiast when you're writing songs about fragrances.

And you know it's been real for you when you can put all your pain in a song.

Shopping is my drug of choice. That's therapy. It takes me away from reality. I know it may seem lame in my culture, but I love this. I love things that represent class and sophistication, and nobody gave me that but me.

AIN'T NOBODY GOING TO TREAT US

We the type of dudes, we going to have to treat ourselves, because ain't nobody going to treat us. That's not self-pity, that's logistics. If you've been through a lot of hell and you're waiting on somebody to show up with a reward, you're going to be waiting a long time. So you do it yourself. I like to take a retreat from time to time, go stay at a hotel and drink some champagne.

Here's how I see it. God gave some people champagne and God gave some people lots of pain, and you already know from this book which side the decent people tend to land on. I'm not asking for a life of nothing but champagne. Life is going to be bittersweet. But I believe in balance. When you have an equal balance in life, it makes you more appreciative of the champagne, and the people who've had nothing but champagne don't even appreciate it anymore, because they've had too much. The other extreme is worse. A person who experiences more pain than anything else in life is not going to be mentally together. You need some goodness in there to stay balanced. I've had Armand de Brignac. It's not cheap, and it's a good champagne, and I feel everybody deserves a taste of it at least once. No one deserves to go through this whole life and taste nothing but pain.

New Year's Eve, I drink champagne; that's tradition. This past one I went to Longhorn with my grandmother and my father, and I ordered the Parmesan-crusted ribeye. I would have ordered it well done, and my dad told me to get it medium well instead. He was right. It was delicious.

I eat healthy most of the year, but on a night like that, why not treat yourself to something good?

I've already told you to buy the \$500 bottle of champagne once in a while, because you can't take any of what you grind for to the grave. I used to feel guilty about that. I was raised in church, and I had relatives who tried to discourage me from the things I wanted. I don't feel guilty anymore. Don't let anybody crush your spirits, and don't let anybody kill your ambition. Whether it's a suit, a watch or a bottle of rosé, it's your life and those are your desires. Everybody has their own value system, and what's sacred to you may mean nothing to the next man.

The holidays are the hardest test of this. It's a sad time of year for people who don't have a loving family, and people know when you're not wanted. One Christmas I was staying at an Extended Stay hotel, and instead of moping I made a list: a Christmas play with my aunt and her husband, golf, skating, a wine bar, the hotel treadmill. I never believed in just sitting inside moping about my problems all day looking at the wall. A guy I talked to that week was taking his wife and kids on a cruise, and I was over there hoping the hotel had an indoor pool. When I was a kid, Christmas morning was the most exciting day of the year: the toys, the music, the tree. Ain't it crazy how all that changes once you get grown? That's when life really gets on your behind, so you build your own version.

Valentine's Day has always been rough for me too. In elementary school it was cards and candy, and it was fun. Once you're grown and you never had a valentine, it's a different day. What gets me through is picturing the Valentine's I would have: dressed up, an elegant restaurant, Bach and Chopin playing, a bottle of Armand de Brignac on the table. I let that be the day's good thought. We're going to toast some champagne to a life of pain, and that's still a toast.

I'll even dream big for you. I've talked about an Undesirables Retreat: a hundred men who've never been chosen, three days in Vegas, golf, shopping, good meals, a toast with the good champagne, then everybody

goes home. I've never even been to Vegas myself. Call it a joke if you want. Life has been bad enough, so you might as well have some goodness in your life. That's the real test in life: trying to make the best of things even when they're not the best.

POSITIVE COPES AND THE OTHER KIND

Everybody copes. Most people I meet are not at peace, and when they get off work they drink or get high to forget the day. I've done my share. I used to sit around drinking to get through, and I'm training myself not to need it. Alcohol in moderation at a bar is a fine escape; a shot of sake or tequila with a good meal is part of a good night. Needing it every night is something else.

I'm not going to judge a man for how he gets through. Find your thing, whether that's the gym, the Holy Quran, a little something to smoke, or a luxury brand, hopefully something positive and not heroin or alcohol, but I won't judge. Church had me feeling guilty for years about private things that any doctor will tell you are normal, and I let that guilt go. And I would never bash a man who destroyed his life, because this is not an easy situation to deal with. Some men in this position have lost their lives to suicide. I understand how they got there. I just want you to find the other road. If you're in that place, call or text 988 tonight.

Here's what the other road looks like for me. I quit the Black & Milds I picked up from watching rap videos, and I'm glad, because that stuff wrecks your health. I've put a few dollars into stocks, like I told you, and that's not a destructive cope. It's a positive one, because it can put you in a better financial position.

And I found purpose. I'm in automotive school learning my trade. One day in class I took the bolts off a flywheel and came home feeling like my life was about to shift. Another day I put front brake pads on a car with my father's buddy. I had bought a rotor I didn't need and had to take it back, and rotors aren't cheap, but I learned that you've got to get

your hands dirty beyond the classroom. Once you start channeling your energy into different things, it can give you a better sense of purpose. I want to learn piano next.

Now the honest part again, because a passion needs to be kept in its lane. In my early twenties photography was my passion. I still have the tripod, and I had a company name picked out, Ocean Photography. It didn't bring a single woman my way, and neither did the skating or the laps at the rec center. I've seen plenty of men with no passion for anything, no hobbies, nothing going, who still have companionship. So don't let anyone gaslight you into believing the hobby is the fix. And don't let anyone put you down for what you like, either. People used to judge me for what I loved, and it used to get me down. It doesn't anymore. Keep your passions for what they're for: enjoyment, lifting your own spirits, feeling good. Your love life you can't control, so focus on the things you can.

DON'T PRESS PAUSE

I knew as a teenager that I probably wouldn't have a family, and so far that's how it's gone. I'm not telling you that to be bitter. I'm telling you because it's the reason this chapter exists. Regardless if you ever get a wife, regardless if you ever have a family, if you spend the rest of your life alone, live your life and do what makes you happy. Just because you a man that's not desired by women, that don't mean you have to stop living your life. Don't press pause on your life.

*Just because you a man that's not desired by women,
that don't mean you have to stop living your life.*

I've never had any shame about going to a restaurant alone, a bar alone, the mall alone. When you already know where you stand, you stop caring if somebody thinks you're crazy for sitting at a table by yourself. Not long ago I spent a Monday at a wine bar with a glass of Chenin Blanc, bruschetta and a charcuterie board, just me. I'm planning a Carnival cruise to the Bahamas by myself with a bottle of Armand de Brignac. Learn to enjoy your own company. Learn to find something that gives you peace, and you won't need anybody's permission to enjoy your life.

I'll be straight with you about the limits. It'll take the pain away momentarily. Not forever. The wine bar closes, the cologne fades, the champagne bottle gets empty, and the circumstance is still there in the morning. But the alternative is worse. You can't fix all of your circumstances in life, but if you find some things that give you peace, it'll make it easier to deal with whatever you're dealing with. Life is going to pass us by anyway, so we might as well do something to make it somewhat meaningful.

Every September I drink a bottle of Nicolas Feuillatte in remembrance of Baraka, an old friend from the early online days who's no longer here. That's what the champagne is for. It's for remembering, it's for toasting, it's for taking the worst thing and making it into something you can hold in your hand and drink. So fill up your cup, live your life, and make a toast to life.

There's a Baccarat tumbler Usher designed with a slanted base, so the glass sits at a tilt, and it's still sleek and elegant leaning like that. That's us. Life doesn't always stand up straight, but when it does, cheers. And when it doesn't, cheers anyway.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ Pour the worst thing in your life into the best glass you can find, and toast to the pain if success never showed up.
- ☛ An idle mind is the devil's workshop, so give yours somewhere to go every day, even if it's only a walk with a bottle of water.
- ☛ Go out to live, not to hunt; the best moments at a wine bar are the ones you didn't go there looking for.
- ☛ Find the outlet that hits like dopamine for you, whether it's dancing, skating or a treadmill, and lean on it hardest on the bad days.
- ☛ Love what you love, the fragrance, the suit, the recipe, the song, and don't let anybody shame you out of it or sell it to you as a way to get a woman.
- ☛ Nobody is going to treat you, so plan your own treats, and plan them first for Christmas and Valentine's Day.
- ☛ Pick a cope that builds you up, like a trade or a few dollars in stocks, over one that tears you down, and never bash the man who couldn't find one.
- ☛ Book the table for one and the cruise for one; being unchosen is no reason to press pause.
- ☛ Raise a glass to the people you've lost, because champagne is for remembering as much as celebrating.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE BEAUTY OF GETTING OLDER



“That’s the beauty of getting older. All that foolishness that mattered as a teenager, all that foolishness that mattered in your 20s, once you 30 and over you see how foolish you was.”

My father used to sit me and my stepbrother down, two boys a year apart, and tell us the same thing over and over: “Before you know it, you’ll be old.” You don’t have the time you think you have. We would nod and go right back outside to play. When you’re a kid a year lasts forever. A summer is a whole lifetime. You can’t picture being old, because old is something that happens to other people.

Then one day it’s April, your birthday is next month, and half the year is gone. Blink again and it’s September, and the year is as good as over. It feels like spring was just here. I’m thirty-six going on thirty-seven, and I remember being nineteen, making my first video in 2008, like it was last week. My cousin just turned thirty-two on April 1st. My father told me

that back in the 90s, when I thought time was crawling, it was flying for him too. I didn't believe him then. I believe him now.

My father also told me that life is a timed art. That's one of the realest things he ever told me. I used to say that if I ever wrote a book, that would be the title. The thing about a timed art is that the clock doesn't care whether you're ready. It doesn't care if you had a rough childhood or a bad run in your twenties. It keeps moving.

This chapter is about what that clock did to me between my twenties and now. Some of it is sad. Some of it is the best thing that ever happened to me. Both are true at the same time, and if you're thirty and up you already know what I mean.

LIFE IS A TIMED ART

When you're young, you think you have more time than you really do. That's the whole trap right there. In the 90s and early 2000s the days and weeks lasted a long time. Now they go by like clockwork. You go to work, you go home, you eat, you shower, you go to sleep, repeat. That's enough to drive anybody insane.

The seasons put it in your face. It's November 1st and here we go again: Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's, back to back, before you've gotten over the last ones. Summer shows up with graduations and couples out in the sun, and then it's gone. Here we are in 2026. In a moment you're going to blink and it's going to be 2027.

And every one of those years comes with a birthday. My father put it plainly: every year you get older, "you're getting close to the grave." That's not gloom for the sake of gloom. It's the only honest motivator I've ever found. Not church, not positive thinking, not people telling me to believe in myself. What got me moving was realizing that I'll be thirty-seven in May, and men in their thirties are headed to forty.

He had another line that went in one ear and out the other when I was a kid: "If you don't do the things that you need to do, you'll never be

able to do any of the things that you want to do.” I heard it again at thirty-five, the same age he was when he joined the union, and that August I enrolled in an automotive program at a technical college. I was not mechanically inclined. I’m becoming mechanically inclined. I’m getting good with the impact gun. I’ve passed climate control, I’ve got three courses left, and one of my father’s buddies is helping me look for an apprenticeship. I thought I’d finish this May. It turns out it’s going to be next year, and that’s fine.

Church taught me that everything happens in God’s season. I don’t believe that anymore. God ain’t got no season. His season is either now or never. So you don’t get to sit and wait for the right one. I’m proud of my consistency with this program, because I wasn’t consistent with anything in my twenties.

MY TWENTIES WERE A BLUR

In my twenties I was wishy-washy. I went to community college for a minute and ended up wasting years on a general studies degree with no direction behind it, while my father kept telling me to get a trade. I had vague ideas about a career. Mostly I was focused on turning up, drinking, taking a puff and having a good time. Looking back at thirty-four, I said it out loud: I was kind of dumb back then.

I was also reckless with my mouth, and there’s a record of it. I made my first video in 2008, at nineteen, and I kept making them all through my twenties with no filter. When I was frustrated and life was beating me down, I would cuss myself out on camera and say off-the-wall things about my own life. Once you put certain things in the atmosphere, you can’t take those things back. I wish I’d had at nineteen the mind I have now, so I could have talked about the same problems in a more professional, intelligent way. The people who have watched since the beginning have seen me come a long way.

I used to beat myself up about those videos. Then I accepted that I was just young, and the wisdom hadn't come yet. You're going to mess up as a kid and in your twenties. That's what your twenties are for. One of the worst things in the world is to live life with regret, so I stopped carrying that one around.

My father always said there are certain things "you will learn just from living, unless you're dumb." And his best friend gave me the line I've carried ever since: "There's no crime in being ignorant. The crime is to remain ignorant." So I'm not going to tell you to beat yourself up over your twenties. The crime is only if you're still that same guy at forty.

THE LIGHT BULB GOES OFF

When you get in your thirties it's like a light bulb goes off. Perception of things is way more clear, and you understand what life is all about. I can't tell you the exact day it happened. I can tell you that at thirty-four my understanding was very clear, and at thirty-six there isn't anything anybody can really tell me, because I've lived long enough to see how things work and to see the patterns in my own life. You know your life story better than anybody.

That includes my mother. She has tried for years to tell me that my outlook on life is wrong, that everybody's life is extremely hard, that I haven't been through anything. She still says it today. Since I got into my thirties I don't allow it, from her or from anybody. As a man in your thirties, can't nobody lie to you or deceive you. You're too grown for that.

The second thing that happens is you stop caring how people perceive you. In my younger days I was overly concerned with fitting in, and that's what messed me up more than anything. Once you're thirty and up, the in crowd and people's opinions are middle school and high school stuff. I'm a full-grown man. Why would I sit around worried about how other people perceive me? I'm a suburban brother. Take it or leave it. It took me until my thirties to say that and mean it.

Part of it is accepting what you're not. We were gaslit into believing everybody can be the boss. Everybody can't be the boss. Everybody can't be that dude. Some people just have a knack for certain things, and once you accept that, you stop beating yourself up over a race you were never built to win. You didn't create most of your challenges. That acceptance is a kind of peace.

You even become immune to things that used to set you on fire. Valentine's Day has been bad for me every year since adolescence. I used to be fiery mad on that day. Now it's just another bad Valentine's. When things have been bad for so long, you become immune to things being bad.

It also clears up who you let around you. In my teens and twenties I wanted to befriend everybody, and I couldn't read the energy people carried, including relatives who smiled in my face and held ill feelings underneath. These days I'm discerning. Evil hides behind a smile, and anybody giving off sinister energy gets cut. I'm thirty-six, closer to forty than thirty, and I just don't have time for demonic energy anymore. It might get lonely, but it's better to be alone than in bad company.

PEOPLE DON'T CHANGE, YOU JUST SEE CLEARER

Here's something that took me a while to understand. The only thing that changes with people is age and the body. The mindset most people had in middle school is the mindset they've still got at thirty-five and forty-five. Same cliques, same bullying, same narcissism, just with adults doing it. As a teenager I believed things would get better once everybody got grown. By thirty-four I could see the opposite. The world really is a big high school.

Look around and you'll see men in their forties and fifties still rapping, still in do-rags, still acting gangster. That's a man stuck at fifteen. One woman, thirty-four years old, said she still wanted a man

from the streets, the same thing a sixteen-year-old wants. The year changed. The bodies changed. The minds didn't.

Showing off is the same story. I went through my phase of trying to impress people as a teenager, and I'm glad I grew out of it. Once you become an adult and you mature, you shouldn't be thinking about impressing people or showing off. Just imagine being sixty-some, seventy-something years old, still trying to impress people. For some folks it's like shaking a habit, and some never shake it. You can't please human beings anyway. So don't try.

What does change is what people expect of you. My father put it this way: "When you're young and you don't have nothing, people give you a pass. But when you're old and you don't have things in place, people think you're stupid and dumb, too." At twenty you get sympathy. At thirty-five you're expected to have your stuff together, and if you don't, there are no more excuses. The world is not going to rub your back.

So the question is whether you're going to age in numbers only or actually grow. You want to age in experiences and accomplishments, and mentally. You don't get old to stay the same. Life is about evolving and elevating. A forty-five-year-old with an eighteen-year-old's mindset has a serious problem.

For me that growth showed up in small ways. I grew up on nothing but rap, starting with the DMX album my father gave me when I was eight, and now it's classical piano that puts me to sleep. People in the comments tell me I dress like an old man. No. It's not dressing like an old man, it's dressing sophisticated. It's dressing like a grown man.

Not long ago I ran into a woman I hadn't seen since high school. She was a year behind me, with a kid now, maybe engaged. We stood there talking about how fast time flies and how different our minds are from the teenagers we used to be. When you're a teenager you think you're ready for the world and you've got it all figured out. You're not ready. It's one thing for somebody to tell you that as a kid. It's a whole other game

when you grow up and live what your parents were trying to tell you. That's what growing looks like. Not everybody gets there.

YOUR HEALTH IS YOUR WEALTH

My grandmother used to tell me to eat my vegetables, and like every kid I didn't want to. Now I'm sautéing broccolini on purpose. In my teens and twenties I didn't think about what I put in my body. I'll be honest without bashing anybody: health is not valued in the urban community. Fried food, sugar, beer, getting high every day. When I started helping my uncle out at a golf club, I noticed how differently the people there cooked and how many vegetables were on the plate, and it opened my eyes. That's part of why so many men break down at forty and fifty from what they ate at twenty. Once you hit your thirties your metabolism slows down, and by forty you had better be health conscious or you are going to pay for it.

So here's what I do, and it isn't complicated. Daily walks. Raw oatmeal every day. A gallon of water. Salmon salads with champagne vinaigrette instead of ranch. Ground turkey over spinach with crispy jalapeños, dried cranberries and honey almonds. I'm hooked on Cava and the falafel bowl. Frozen grapes and berries instead of sweets, because sugar is the main thing to watch. At night I drink warm water with lemon, clove, ginger and cinnamon, and I wake up energized. I cut way back on Italian food, because carbs blow up the midsection.

No more beer, because of the beer belly. Champagne or cognac around the holidays and that's it. I barely eat beef anymore except a birthday steak. I skate, I walk, and I've got a gym membership coming. I'm not after six-pack abs. I'm after an ironing board stomach. People assume a man in my position lives on Popeyes and lemon pepper wings every day. That's lookism, same as everything else. I'd rather have a turkey sandwich with a nice glass of Veuve Clicquot.

You're going to pay to eat healthy in this country, because eating healthy is not promoted here. But you'll pay a lot more later if you don't. You don't want to start making life changes when the doctor tells you you have a life-threatening illness. You want to be preventive. Start young if you can. If you didn't, start now.

And understand why I'm telling you this in a book about a life of hell. I believe a bad life shows up in the body; I've had bags under my eyes since I was a kid, and salads won't cancel out hell. But even if you live in a life of hell, you don't have to damage your body either. The world may have dealt you a bad hand with women, with money, with family. Your body is the one thing still in your hands.

*Even if you live in a life of hell, you don't have to
damage your body either.*

My grandparents gave me one more rule I still keep: "Cleanliness is next to godliness." My grandmother bathed me in Dove white soap, and I still use it. A shower is therapy. You only get one life, and after you're gone from here, that's it. There's no rewinding the hands of time.

REMINISCENT REGRET

Now the hard part. Getting older makes you handle things better, but it doesn't make the things go away. The pain doesn't go away the older that you get. You just learn how to deal with life in a more effective way. In your thirties you don't wild out or publicly berate yourself the way you did in your twenties, even when you feel terrible inside. You hold it together.

The saddest part of getting older, for me, has a name: reminiscent regret. It's the windows of opportunity you missed when you were

young, and they get harder to look at every year. Time is the one thing you cannot get back. That's why prison is a punishment. Time that's lost is just lost.

My father and I talked once about how a first house at thirty is a different thing from a first house at sixty or seventy. Certain things only count at the right age. In my experience the same goes for love. Your first time at fourteen and your first time at fifty are not the same thing. I talked to a man of forty-three who had been with a woman once, at nineteen, and never again. At least he got it once. People like to call men like that late bloomers. Some people never bloom.

I'm thirty-six with no wife and no kids, and I'm not going to let anybody tell me there's a light at the end of the tunnel on that. Being a man deprived of love and affection is a pain that never goes away. I've cried about it. I'm telling you that so you know I'm not performing when I say the beauty of getting older is real anyway.

I daydream about being a kid often, about the summer camp and the trips with my grandparents I told you about earlier in this book. Life got hard in middle school when puberty hit, and it never got easy again. If I had a time machine, I'd go back to being a kid in the 90s.

*Being a man deprived of love and affection is a pain
that never goes away.*

But if you gave me fifteen or twenty-one back with the knowledge I have now, I wouldn't try to turn myself into somebody else. I'd maneuver differently. I'd have gotten a trade instead of a general studies degree. I'd have started a business and been ahead of the game. I'd have been consistent with the channel years before I actually was. And I'd have listened to Dominique the first time.

And if I could sit that teenager down for one minute, I'd tell him to stop trying to impress anybody. If I'm going to impress somebody, it's going to be myself. If I'm going to make somebody happy, it's going to be me. That's the whole lesson of getting older, and it took me most of my life to learn it.

DO IT NOW

You'll be old before you know it. Time is not waiting. The time is now. One of my father's buddies talked to me not long ago about getting my own place, and it made me think about how many years my father spent pointing me toward a skilled trade. He was leading me in the right direction the whole time. I just wasn't listening yet.

So learn a skill. Not everybody is cut out for college, and in this economy a trade is what keeps the lights on. Most people are not going to be rich. Most people are going to work until the day they leave this world. Even if you never marry, even if you never have kids, you want to be in a solid financial place when you can't work anymore. Start small. I've got a few dollars in Tesla. Keep adding until you own a whole share.

Then live. Too many men in my position never leave the house and have no hobbies. I go to wine bars by myself. I skate. I play golf. I'm getting my passport so I can go to Thailand with my father's buddy. Even a walk can make you feel surprisingly good.

And treat yourself. My father loves an expensive restaurant, and he's the one who got me to see that life is not as long as I once thought it was. Life is short, so treat yourself every once in a while. I used to feel guilty buying myself something expensive. I don't anymore. Just make sure you're buying it because you want it, not so somebody will look at you and approve. Live within your means, but buy the cologne. Buy the shirt.

One more thing, for the men in their twenties who think thirty is old. It's not. Uncle age is forty or forty-five and up. Your thirties are when you finally get to be yourself, when the foolishness falls off, when nobody can

gaslight you, when you know what matters and what never did. The pain is still there. But you're too grown to let it run you. You don't want to become an old person and realize you didn't do nothing with your life. That's the only thing left to be afraid of. So don't.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ The clock doesn't care whether you're ready, so stop waiting on a season that isn't coming.
- ☛ Every birthday puts you closer to the grave; let that be the thing that gets you moving.
- ☛ Forgive the man you were in your twenties, as long as you aren't still him at forty.
- ☛ Once you're past thirty, nobody who hasn't lived your life gets to tell you your perception is wrong, not even your mother.
- ☛ Showing off is for teenagers; a grown man only has to impress himself.
- ☛ People get older without getting different, so trust the patterns you've already seen.
- ☛ Start eating like a grown man now, before a doctor hands you a reason to.
- ☛ The pain doesn't leave in your thirties; you just learn to carry it without falling apart in public.
- ☛ Learn a skill, put a few dollars away, and buy the nice thing for you, not for an audience.
- ☛ Age in experiences and in your mind, not just in numbers.

“You cannot beat the system.”



MY GRANDFATHER



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LESSONS FROM THE HEADLINES



“When you see the red flags and you still stick along for the ride, you’re just waiting for the grand finale.”

If I could have picked any career in the world, I would have been a news reporter. Shirt and tie, sitting at the desk, speaking eloquently and professionally, telling you what happened today. That never happened for me. I cook for a living and I talk into a camera. But somewhere along the way the channel turned into my own little news desk anyway, because I started covering the stories that came across my feed, and I kept covering them, and people kept watching.

I want to be clear about why. I’m not covering a killing in Gwinnett County or a shooting at a park in Rochester for entertainment. I don’t enjoy it. I cover them because the more of these stories I cover and the more experiences I have, the more I see the same patterns, and I had to learn in life that when you see stuff repetitively, you have to pay attention to those patterns. These stories back up everything I’ve been telling you in the rest of this book. They are the receipts.

So I'm not going to retell every one of them here, and I'm not going to give you the details, because the details are not the point and the families have been through enough. I'm going to sort them by the lesson, because that's how I sort them in my head. Once you see the buckets, you start seeing them in your own life before you end up in somebody else's news story.

My grandmother told me when I was a kid that an idle mind is the devil's workshop. My grandfather told me you can't beat the system. My father told me insanity is doing the same thing over and over expecting a different result. I didn't understand any of it then. I understand all of it now, because I've watched it play out on the news a few hundred times.

WAITING FOR THE GRAND FINALE

The biggest bucket, by far, is red flags that got ignored. I could fill this whole chapter with the same story told in different cities. A woman with a solid profession, a nurse, a realtor, a lawyer, a hairstylist with her own business, gets involved with a man who has a long record of putting his hands on women. Everybody around her knows it. She knows it. In one case the man had an order of protection against him. In another she paid his bail. Then she tries to leave, or she moves on, or there is one more argument, and the story ends the way these stories end.

It's always a man with a dark past. It never fails. That's not me being dramatic, that's me watching the same pattern in case after case until I couldn't unsee it. And the lesson is the simplest one in this book: if a man put his hands on you before, he'll do it again. You can't change the devil. The devil is going to be the devil. People only change when they decide for themselves that they want to change, and a grown man with a violent streak has usually already decided.

The red flags are almost always there in the early phase, when everything is sweet and you don't want to look at anything that would spoil it. That's the phase where every one of these stories begins, and it's

the phase where you still have the most room to walk. I've seen that early phase at home, too: my mother says she left my father over his hard temper, the side of him that's ready for war, and she will tell you herself she saw that side before the wedding.

What I've seen, over and over, is that when that chemistry is there, all common sense goes out the window. I used to feel sorry for the women in these stories, and I'll be honest with you, it has gotten harder for me, because so many of them walked in knowing exactly who he was and believed they could tame him. You can't tame the beast. When you get with a lion, the lion may be beautiful, but the lion is going to eat you sooner or later. Ignoring red flags can cost you your life. I apply that line to myself as much as to anybody.

*When you get with a lion, the lion may be beautiful,
but the lion is going to eat you sooner or later.*

And brothers, this lesson is yours too, in two ways. One: vet a woman's past before you get close, because the man before you may still be infatuated with her and unstable, and more than one new boyfriend has been taken out by an ex who still had a key. I would not invite a woman to my place until I had built a real rapport with her. Two: don't let people gaslight you into believing the reason you can't have a wife and kids is because your swag and your game is not strong enough. The men in these stories didn't have game. They had a look and a dark side, and if you're a decent man who got passed over for one of them, that is not a flaw in you to fix.

WHO YOU LET IN YOUR HOUSE

The second bucket is closer to home. Literally. Who you let through the front door.

A young mother in Charlotte let a man with a violent history and prison time move in with her and her two small children. A young woman in Atlanta with her own place let a platonic male friend move in; he contributed nothing, she told him to leave, and police say he killed her for it. A mother in Maryland left her two children with their aunt. A girl in Florida was failed by the very parent who was supposed to protect her. None of those people were strangers. That's the point.

First rule: you don't need to have your kids around any and everybody. Before the attraction, before the convenience, before somebody tells you "he's family," look at the environment you're putting a child in. Anybody can bring a kid into the world, but everybody is not fit to be a parent and to raise that child, and some of the people that are supposed to be protecting the child from danger are the ones bringing danger to that child. I used to want to believe you could trust relatives. The news cured me of that.

The same rule covers friends. An eighteen-year-old from a good family went on a trip with his high school friends and didn't come back, and I already told you about the young woman who went to Mexico with people she called friends and never came home. The very people that you call friends are the very people who end up ending your chapter. I have said that on the channel so many times it sounds like a slogan. It's not. It's a pattern.

I was guilty of this myself. You already know about my Mr. Friendly years, when I befriended anybody because I was desperate for friends and the church had taught me to give everybody the benefit of the doubt. Growing up in the suburbs shelters you behind too much, and I went and befriended guys from a world I didn't come from. Every one of them

turned into an enemy eventually, and I'm fortunate it was only hurt feelings and not a hospital.

So now I make people prove their loyalty, the way I laid out when we talked about friends: one proven buddy is my whole circle, and nobody gets to show me his teeth twice. People are very good at pretending. Be cordial, be decent, but keep people out of your personal world until you see where their mind is at. Test the waters first.

IT AIN'T THAT SERIOUS

The third bucket is the one that scares me the most, because it's the one that can catch anybody: arguments that escalate over nothing.

Two brothers were helping their mother move, got into an argument, and one of them shot the other in front of her. Police say a man in Gwinnett County argued with his wife, and by the end of the night four people were dead and three children were hiding in a closet while the oldest one called 911. A cookout in a Rochester park in 2024 turned into a mass shooting, with shots fired from more than one gun. Two women died and five people were hurt. A birthday party at a Georgia park ended in a shootout between two groups over, most likely, a whole bunch of nothing. In Tennessee, a twelve-year-old girl was charged with killing her eight-year-old cousin after, a relative said, they had argued over an iPhone.

Nobody knows what most of these arguments were about, and that's exactly the lesson. It could have been over something petty. Nowadays people will snap and go over the edge over the smallest little thing. A lot of guys don't have effective conflict resolution skills. An argument is not worth killing someone. There is nothing on this earth worth taking a life over unless somebody is harming your family, and "he disrespected me" is not that.

It ain't that serious over an iPhone. You can get another iPhone. You can't get another life. You can restart a video game. You can't restart real life. The brother who killed his brother went to prison for a long time,

and now one family lost two sons on the same afternoon. The warehouse worker accused of setting a \$500 million fire after complaining on video about pay is sitting in jail waiting for trial, and whatever he felt he was owed, a cell pays less. You have to think before you act. Don't allow your emotions to rule you. There are people serving life sentences because they let their emotions rule them for one moment.

*There are people serving life sentences because they
let their emotions rule them for one moment.*

I learned to walk away young, and I'm glad I did. When I was eighteen, working a job, I was putting silverware in a bin when a coworker said something slick to me. Everything in me wanted to turn around and get confrontational. I thought strategically instead. I thought about where that road ends, which is prison or the graveyard, because a fool can end up in either one over a comment at work. So I kept putting silverware in the bin. The way I see it, even Will Smith at the Oscars could have waited for the commercial break. Whatever you have to say to somebody, you can say it after you've calmed down.

That applies double between men and women. My grandfather told me when I was a kid: if a woman makes you want to put your hands on her, you don't need her, you need to get away from her. If you have to argue and yell every day, you shouldn't be together, period. And if a woman tells you no, whether it's on a dating app or in the aisle at Walmart, just leave it alone. There's no need to beat a dead horse. I covered the man who couldn't take no from a woman he met online, and the young man in a store who couldn't take no from a woman who told him she was married. Nobody won in either story. As a man you still have to have some self-control, even if a woman does turn you down. Rejection hurts. I know it as well as anybody. It's still not a reason.

DON'T GET GAS IN THE HOOD

Fourth bucket: where you choose to be.

Three people were shot at a gas station in DeKalb County who had nothing to do with whatever foolishness was going on. They were buying gas. Six people were shot at a nightclub in Buckhead, which I used to think was the safe part of Atlanta. A woman stepped outside her house to see what the noise was and walked into young men who had nothing better to do that night than break into cars. Being at the wrong place can cost you your life.

My grandmother's warnings about urban areas didn't fully make sense to me until I started reading these stories. When I had a car, I always got gas outside the city. If I know it's a hood place, I'm not going. That's the code that I live by. People will tell you you're not real, you're a sellout, you forgot where you came from. Who cares? At least you won't be dead.

And don't think a nice zip code saves you. The demon time is expanding its presence everywhere now. You don't have to be in the hood to meet your demise. What I pay attention to is the crowd and the energy, not the address. A club where they rap all night and the scent of marijuana is louder than your Tom Ford is going to draw the same situation wherever it sits. A wine bar, a jazz bar, a hotel with people you actually know, those are grown spaces. Dress codes exist to keep certain energies out, and I've learned to respect them.

It even covers the small decisions. If you know a certain R&B singer pulls women up on stage and kisses them, don't take your wife to that concert and then get mad when it happens to you. A simple day enjoying yourself, having a barbecue in the park, it could be your last barbecue. I'm not telling you to hide in your house. I'm telling you to use wisdom about the situations you choose, because once you're in the situation, you don't control what the next man does.

THE SYSTEM IS AIRTIGHT

Fifth bucket, and this one is for my brothers especially: law enforcement.

I covered the Jacksonville traffic stop where deputies broke a man's window, punched him and pulled him out of his car. I covered the shooting in Minneapolis where a thirty-seven-year-old mother, a U.S. citizen, was shot and killed by an ICE agent while she was in her car. The government says she tried to hit agents with it; witnesses and the mayor disputed that. I'll say here what I said on the channel. The officer in Jacksonville was wrong for busting the glass and punching that man in the face. That was going overboard. In my opinion the shooting in Minneapolis was excessive force, and I want to see justice served. I'm not excusing any of it, and I will keep bringing up race, because from what I've seen this does not happen to other groups of men the way it happens to us.

And the lesson is still the lesson. My grandfather told me this when I was a kid, and he told me more than once: never argue with the police. The system is airtight. You're not going to win. If an officer tells you to get out of the car, you need to get out of the car. Arguing with them is just adding fuel to the fire. It's like pouring gasoline on fire. If you want to debate and challenge, do that in a legal courtroom. Don't do it out in the streets, because out there it's your word against the officer's and he has the badge. Comply, survive, and fight it afterward with a lawyer. You can't get your rights back from a hospital bed.

My grandfather's line covers more than police. When you break the law, the law is going to come get you, and nobody outruns it for long. He used to put it like this: "The police may not catch you today. They may not catch you a year from now. But one day, when you least expect it, it's all going to come crumbling down." The sixteen-year-old in Newton County who is accused of shooting his stepfather and driving off in the

man's SUV spent two months on the run before he was caught. The Arizona teacher who was arrested after a thirteen-year-old student's parents found her messages thought nobody would ever see them. One bad decision can cause your whole life to be in shambles, and you'll never be able to rekindle your life again.

That's what I want the youngsters to hear, especially the ones with no guidance at home. A lot of young dudes who were never raised in the streets want to be down with that life so bad, because they want the approval of their peers. The music is entertainment. A lot of those rappers never lived what they're rapping about; they just know the people listening are impressionable. There is no treasure chest waiting on you at the finish line for living a life of crime. The only thing waiting on you is prison or the graveyard. Every now and then somebody gets lucky, does his time and comes out a model or an actor, but nine times out of ten the street pays you back with a cell or a casket. Every decision has a consequence, so know what you're signing up for. You can't live the life of a headbuster and then cry when the judge says fifty years to life.

I'm thirty-six now, and it seems like yesterday I was sixteen and thought I had all the answers to life. Nobody at sixteen has any answers. That's why the adults in a kid's life have to be parents and not friends, and why children are not supposed to know where you keep your weapons. A kid with no guidance and access to a gun is a headline waiting to be written, and it destroys two families: the one he hurt and his own.

YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT SOMEBODY IS BATTLING

The last bucket is the one that explains all the others.

A man walked into a Walmart in Michigan and attacked strangers. In Texas, a man was charged with capital murder after a five-year-old girl was shot in her family's car at night in what police called a suspected road-rage shooting. A man in Michigan chased down and beat a Black man for

supposedly staring at him. A young woman who had fled the war in Ukraine was attacked and killed on a train in Charlotte, and police say it was a stranger sitting behind her. None of those victims did anything. You don't even have to be doing nothing. You could do something by mistake, a person interprets it the wrong way, and that's it.

A person can look normal. They can look like they got it all together, but they could be completely off their rocker. Mental illness is real and it is at an all-time high, and I believe most people out here are pretending to be happy. They put on the poker face at work and they're miserable. Nobody comes into the world crazy. The world can make you crazy. Everything costs more, people are working two and three jobs and can't get ahead, and some of them are one bad day from spazzing out on whoever is standing closest. That might be you.

So this is how I move now. I'm cordial to everybody. I don't mistreat people, I don't go around looking for problems, and I don't look at anybody at the gym. I say the bare minimum, I stay in my lane, and I only chat if the vibe is right. Going out of my way to talk to strangers, the way I did when I was younger, is a recipe for disaster when you don't know what the person in front of you is carrying. I covered a killing at a fast food restaurant in Michigan, and the lesson for employees is simple. If a manager doesn't like you, cuts your hours or sends you home, all you have to do is find a different place of employment. The manager in that story was a single mother of six with fifteen years on the job, and the coworker police say came back with a knife after being sent home early is now charged with murder. Walk away.

Now the other side of this, and I'm talking directly to the brothers who feel like the world left them to rot. I covered the gym shooting in Pennsylvania from 2009, where a forty-eight-year-old man who had kept an online diary about years of rejection by women walked into a women's aerobics class with a gun. I covered the nineteen-year-old outcast in Missouri who went back to his old school. I know what it's like to feel like you were never wanted. I'm thirty-six and I've never been chosen. I

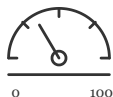
understand the anger. And I would never excuse behavior like this. Just because you're in a bad situation, you don't crash out like this. Nobody should blame those victims and nobody should use loneliness as an excuse.

Whatever you're going through, make sure you talk to somebody. Don't just keep it all inside. As a man you learn to pretend that all is well, because nobody cares what you're going through, and holding all of it in is how some men end up in a headline. Find one person. Talk to the camera if you have to; that's what I did. Life dealt a lot of us a bad hand, and I'm not going to pretend otherwise. You still have to play it without taking anybody down with you.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ If a man put his hands on you once, he'll do it again, and the time to leave was the first time.
- ☛ Don't let anybody move in with you or around your children until they have proven who they are over time.
- ☛ Make people prove their loyalty before you let them into your personal world.
- ☛ No argument is worth a life; walk away and say what you need to say after you've cooled off.
- ☛ If a woman tells you no, leave it alone, and if a woman makes you want to put your hands on her, get away from her.
- ☛ If you know a place is prone to violence, don't go, no matter who calls you a sellout for it.
- ☛ Never argue with the police in the street; comply, survive, and fight it in a courtroom.
- ☛ A person can look normal and be one bad day from snapping, so give strangers nothing to react to.
- ☛ Rejection and loneliness can explain a man's pain, but they never excuse taking it out on anybody.
- ☛ You can restart a video game; you can't restart real life.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE HELL METER



“Instead of the hell being on 100 percent, you can take it down to about 40 percent. It can gauge the hell meter in your life when you do stuff.”

The Sunday before Christmas, I took myself to a wine bar at the Avalon in Alpharetta. That is a rough stretch of the year for any man without a loving family around him, and I could have sat in the house and stared at the wall. Instead I put on a blazer and went somewhere I had never been. Wine bars were a new hobby for me then. I tried a Vermentino, ordered a cheese plate, some beef bites and a flatbread, and sat there taking it all in.

The crowd was diverse. A couple of women complimented my blazer. I asked a Spanish woman if she was single, and she had a boyfriend. That’s fine. It’s better to try than not to try. A brother who wasn’t raised the stereotypical way gets rejected by his own culture, so he has to broaden his horizons and get in where he fits in, and that night I fit. I talked with my buddies in Texas and Tennessee that day, and I admitted

to them what I'll admit to you: that is exactly the kind of place I'd take a wife, if I ever had one.

Nothing about my circumstances changed between the time I walked in and the time I walked out. No wife, no money falling out of the sky, no relatives calling. But I walked in at 100 and walked out a whole lot lower. That's the night I put a name on it. I call it the hell meter.

FORTY IS A NUMBER A MAN CAN LIVE WITH

Every man living a life of hell has a needle inside him, whether he knows it or not. Some days it's buried at 100. That's the day you lie in the bed going over everything that went wrong, the phone don't ring, and the walls feel like they're closing in. Other days it drops a little and you can breathe. Going somewhere you've never been lifts your spirits. Dwelling on your circumstances makes them worse. Doing things is what moves the needle.

I stopped trying to get that needle to zero a long time ago. Zero is for the people life was good to from the jump. Life is just all about the luck of the draw, as my father says, and some of us drew short. I can't make women want me. I can't make my relatives call. I can't bring the prices down at the grocery store. There are things in life that we do have control over, but there are also things that we don't have any control over, and a man who doesn't know the difference is going to wear himself out.

Zero is for the people life was good to from the jump.

So why 40? Because 40 is a number a man can live with. At 40 you still know where you stand, and the hell is still there in the morning. But at 40 you can go to work without snapping, you can sleep at night, and you can still enjoy a good plate of food. You need a break from hell sometime.

This chapter is the gauge and the toolbox: what pushes the needle up, what brings it down, and how to read your own.

WHAT PUSHES THE NEEDLE UP

Sitting idle in the house. Nothing pushes the needle faster than doing nothing. Lying in the bed thinking about your circumstances weighs on you, and it doesn't make one single thing better. My grandmother always says an idle mind is the devil's workshop, and she's right. Back when the bottle was how I got through the day, all it did was keep me on the couch.

The holidays and Valentine's Day. The sadness really hits you a hundredfold around the holiday season. Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's come back to back, the commercials are full of couples and families, and if you don't have that, the season is built to remind you. Valentine's has always been a rough day for me. Know those dates are coming and plan around them, the same way I planned that Sunday at the Avalon.

Relatives and fake friends. The holidays will really show you how people feel about you. See how many family members call you. The relative who smiles at the table and talks about you when you leave is pushing your needle up every time you sit down with him. Same with the friend who pretends. In my experience a person who acts like they like you while they secretly can't stand you takes something out of you every visit, even when you can't put your finger on what.

Bad company and people on demon time. Everything is expensive, everybody is stressed, and the littlest thing sets people off. Try to say the bare minimum to people, because people are on demon time. One day two of my roommates got into a fight, tore the place up, the police came and one of them got arrested. That's the day I said this is why it's not good to live with folks. Other people's chaos becomes your chaos if you're standing close enough.

Social media and the halo-effect crowd. Social media is a place for people who are attractive to flex. Your face card is pretty much your credentials out there, and if you're a man women don't want, scrolling through beautiful women all day will take your joy. Limit your time on these platforms. Comparing yourself to people who get everything handed to them for how they look is a losing game. You could be the devil incarnate, but just because you look good, people will forgive you no matter how many bad things you do. And remember most of that glitz is a front anyway. My father always said the shiny things people show off are mostly payments they still owe.

People with no receipts. My father never told me one thing he couldn't prove. Most people can't say that. Everybody is not worth listening to. Some people's advice is not worth a hill of beans. Dating coaches selling you the gym and confidence for a check have no receipts for a man like me. Older men mean well, like my father's buddy who still tells me I can find a good woman in church, but I grew up in church and I never found her.

Money stress and inflation. Most people's stress in life is financial. It's expensive just to breathe air. The cheapest apartment in Douglasville is \$1,195 a month, and they want you making three times the rent just to get the keys. Financial stress and just the stress of everyday life hits you ten times harder around the holiday season, so when the money is tight and the calendar says December, expect the needle to jump.

Lying to yourself. You might fool everybody around you, but you won't fool the man in the mirror. People think pretending everything is great keeps the needle down. It does the opposite. Lying to yourself is gaslighting yourself, and it leads to frustration, because lying to yourself does not change the reality of things. My mother will tell you her life has been great. I know better, and I think on some level she does too.

Holding everything inside. As a man you're expected to act like nothing bothers you. I've told you I'm numb to a lot of it, but numb is not healed. Burying your emotions and suppressing your emotions is a

very deadly thing to do. That pressure has to go somewhere, and when it comes out all at once, that's when men end up in a cell.

Carrying grudges you can't do anything about. My family is not close; like I said, everybody got beef. There comes a point where you have to forgive and forget. I don't mean you let the person back in. If somebody burns me, I cut them out of my life and I move on. I don't carry them around. The biggest grudge some of us carry is against life itself, for the hand we got dealt. I didn't ask for none of the challenges that I've had in my life. That's why I had to stop beating myself up.

WHAT BRINGS IT DOWN

Getting out the house. Like I said about my grandmother getting us out the house, this one comes first. You got to get out, enjoy yourself, explore new things, broaden your horizons. It will help you cope with life. My first time up in Johns Creek, I sat down at a Japanese spot and tried tonkatsu for the first time in my life. New place, new food, and the needle moved.

Walking. It costs nothing. Even a walk with a bottle of water can change your day. Some mornings I get a walk in before I head to work, and I show up lower on the meter than I would have.

Dancing. I've told you my dance videos are a hit of dopamine and an escape from this hell realm. They also trim the waistline. Put on some R&B and move.

Working out for yourself. You do that for your own benefit as a man. You don't go to the gym to attract women. I go because the treadmill doesn't leave room to replay everything I've been through.

Cooking a real meal. Lettuce wraps with ground turkey and Mediterranean vegetables, a salmon salad with champagne vinaigrette, something you made with your own hands instead of something out of a box. We got to do what we got to do to keep our heads up in these times, guys.

A fragrance and a good shirt for nobody but you. Anything you do as a man, you should do it for yourself. I don't believe in doing things to impress other people. Bathe in Acqua di Parma shower gel, spray something you love, put on a nice shirt even if it came from Target. Nobody has to see it. You'll know.

A glass of champagne and a toast to the pain. Pop up some champagne and say salute to being in a bad position. Everybody wasn't born to win. Notice I said a glass. A glass with a toast is a celebration. A bottle to forget is the old me sitting around drinking.

Learning a skill or a trade. With prices where they are, a trade is how a man stays afloat. Every course I pass in my automotive program brings the needle down, because it gives me purpose and a way to pay for the rest of this list.

Small investments. It's getting rough out here, and it's pretty much the haves and the have-nots. I put a few dollars here and a few dollars there into stocks. Even making \$7 or \$8 on a stock helps with inflation, and it's a cope that puts you in a better position instead of a worse one.

Solitude and peace. You can't fall out with yourself. You can't argue with yourself. When I'm by myself there's no drama coming in the door and nobody to take me out of character.

Cutting off people who raise it. You don't keep talking to a demon. You get rid of a demon. You cut them out of your life. My motto now is if you're not helping me elevate financially, mentally or spiritually, what am I talking to you for?

Honest people in your corner. The only people who ever led me right were my father and my grandparents, because they told me the truth even when it hurt. Most people in today's world are fake. If you find some genuine people along the way, hold on to them. One honest voice is worth a room full of smiles.

Talking to someone before you snap. Get it out of your chest and into somebody's ear. Pick a close buddy who won't judge you, ideally somebody who knows your same struggle, because a man who never lived

it will only argue with you. Don't allow these demons to cause you to crash out.

Accepting reality instead of fighting it. When you quit expecting this place to be fair, it stops making you so mad. Most people are not going to live good lives, and knowing that gives me a sense of comfort. I'm not alone. Sitting around focusing on things that are out of your control, that's just going to make you miserable. Accept the hand, then play it.

READING YOUR OWN METER

You can't move a needle you won't look at, so check it honestly, the same way you'd check the oil. Take a real inventory of your life. If your bad days outweigh your good days, you got a reason to complain, and you got a reason to do something about it.

Start with the phone. Count who called you this year just to see how you were doing. Not who called when they needed something. That number tells you who belongs at your table and who gets a plate to go.

Then notice how you feel after you leave people. Some people leave you lighter. Some people leave you heavier, like you've been carrying their bags up the stairs. Good frequencies cannot mix with bad frequencies, and your body already knows which is which before your mind admits it.

Last, look at what you do on your worst days. Do you lie in the bed? Pour another drink? Scroll? Go quiet and hold it in? Pay attention to patterns. Whatever you reach for when the needle is at 100 tells you exactly where the work is.

*Whatever you reach for when the needle is at 100
tells you exactly where the work is.*

Here's how I read it:

- ☛ 100: You're lying in the bed holding it all in and thinking about crashing out, so talk to somebody you trust today and get out the door, even if it's only a walk around the block.
- ☛ 80: It's the holidays or a bad week, the fake relatives and the halo-effect crowd are all over you, so put the phone down, take your plate to go and do something by yourself that you enjoy.
- ☛ 60: You're working and paying bills and getting by, but it's work, eat, sleep, repeat, so cook a real meal, treat yourself within your means and keep learning your trade.
- ☛ 40: The hell is still there, but you're sleeping, eating right, staying active and keeping bad company out, so keep the routine going and raise a glass to it.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ Forget zero; get the needle down to 40 and call that a win.
- ☛ Go somewhere you've never been, because a new place can move the needle when nothing else will.
- ☛ Know the holidays and Valentine's are coming, and have somewhere to be before they hit.
- ☛ Limit the scrolling, because comparing yourself to the halo-effect crowd is a game you can't win.
- ☛ Numb is not healed, so let the pressure out with somebody you trust before it comes out on its own.
- ☛ One glass to salute the pain, never a bottle to forget it.
- ☛ Cut off the people who raise the needle and hold on to the honest ones who lower it.
- ☛ Check your meter the way you check your oil, honestly and often.

*“What’s the purpose of having a life and
you do nothing with it?”*



MY FATHER



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE MEANING OF EXISTENCE



*“The only person who can truly tell you what life is all about
is yourself.”*

My mother has a copy of *The Purpose Driven Life* sitting in her house. I have never opened it and I never will. I already know what’s in there. It’s the same thing I heard every Sunday growing up in church: God has a plan for you, everybody was put here for a reason, your trials are preparation for your greatness. I sat under that teaching for most of my life, and my own life never once lined up with it.

Then one day my father said something to me that was simpler than anything in that book. He asked me, what’s the purpose of having a life and you do nothing with it? He wasn’t preaching. He wasn’t quoting scripture. He was just asking a question. I’ve been chewing on it ever since, because it’s the closest thing to a meaning of life anybody has ever handed me.

So this is the last conversation in this book, and it’s the one everything else has been leading to. What is this thing we’re doing here? Why were some of us born into a bad hand? Is there something on the other side?

And if you can't answer any of that, what do you do with the time you've got? I'm not going to pretend I have it figured out. I'm going to tell you where I've landed at thirty-six.

TEN PEOPLE, TEN ANSWERS

Ask ten people what life is about and you'll get ten different answers. That's not because nine of them are wrong. It's because every one of them is describing the life they lived. A person whose life was mostly good is going to tell you life is beautiful, work hard and you'll get there, God is good all the time. A person whose life was mostly hell is going to tell you something very different. Both of them are speaking from their own reality, and neither one of them has lived yours.

I see both answers every day at work. I cook in a hotel kitchen, and out front the guests are pulling up in a Mercedes GLE or an EQS. Ask one of them what life is about and you'll get one philosophy. Then ask the people I actually talk to in my personal life, most of whom are down and out, and you'll get another. Same city, same year, two different worlds, and each one is telling the truth about the world it lives in.

That's why I don't let people argue me out of my philosophy anymore. When somebody comes at me with "work hard, study, apply yourself and you can achieve anything," I understand that's what worked for them. Good for them. But I know plenty of people who worked hard and applied themselves and got nothing, because the odds weren't in their favor. Some people had nothing but luck on their side. God has favorites, better believe it. Life is good to some people and life is bad to some people. It's a duality, the yin and the yang.

So I'll say it plainly, because it's the foundation of everything else in this chapter. If you're searching for meaning in your life, just remember no one else can give you that meaning. Not the preacher. Not the motivational speaker. Not me. Whatever matters to you, whatever is important to you, whatever you value, whatever you love, that's the

meaning of this existence. It's different for every person, and it's supposed to be.

I'll give you mine, since I'm asking you to find yours. My father told me it's not how you live, it's what you leave behind when you're gone, and that one stuck. For me, the meaning of life is to leave a mark that can't be erased. To live a life to where people can remember you by memorable things. I've been the outcast most of my life, but if people can say one good thing about me after I'm gone, something real, then I did something here. That's mine. Yours doesn't have to look anything like it.

A GIFT, A GAMBLE, AN EXPERIMENT

People love to say life is a gift. I'll tell you what I've seen. Life is a gift for some people and life is a curse for some people. If you were born attractive, born smart, born to two parents who had their act together, yes, life was handed to you wrapped up with a bow. If you were born at a disadvantage, with the wrong genetics, into a family that was never close, in a place that beats people down, nobody wrapped anything for you. When life has given you nothing but lemons, you're not making lemonade. You're making depressed-ade. So when somebody tells you to be thankful anyway and stop complaining, understand that person would feel exactly like you if they were standing in your shoes. Don't let nobody gaslight you into loving a life that has never loved you back.

My father never called it a gift. He called it a gamble. Life is all about luck, he told me. Some people got dealt the right cards, some people got the cheat code, and the rest of us are playing with whatever came out of the deck. He told me something else I've never forgotten: you can't become whatever you want to be in life. You only get as far as what's in you allows. Every kid in America gets told they can be anything. My father told me the truth, and I thank him for it, because it saved me years of chasing things that were never in my cards.

*Don't let nobody gaslight you into loving a life that
has never loved you back.*

The way I look at it now, life is an experiment. You're like a chemist in a lab, and you don't know going in whether you're about to mix up a potion or blow the whole building up. Some people had the right formula from the start and knocked it out the park like Hank Aaron. Some people strike out every time. And here's the part people don't want to hear: the formula was written before you got here. Your family, your finances, your location, your IQ, all of that was set in stone when you came out of the womb. We're not the ones pulling the strings. The Most High is the one pulling the strings. So don't beat yourself up over how your experiment turned out. Most of it was never in your hands.

And you only get to run it once. The thing about life is it's a one-time process. You can't do this thing all over again. You got one time to do it right. It would be nice to press rewind like the VHS tapes we had back in the 90s, but it doesn't work that way. A lot of people's potential was stunted by roadblocks early on, and they'll never get those years back. That's not negativity. That's just the clock.

TO LIVE IS TO SUFFER

DMX said it better than any preacher I ever heard: to live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering. The first half of that line is the one most people fight. The second half is the one I fight. How can you create meaning out of pain and suffering and misery? Some days I don't see any meaning in it at all. They want to tell you life is beautiful. I'm telling you most people are suffering every single day. They get up and do things they don't want to do, 365 days a year, to pay rent that's

ridiculous and buy groceries that cost double what they used to. The only people who aren't suffering are the ones at the very top, and a lot of those are the wicked. Wage slave, wage slave, wage slave. That's not living. That's just existing.

It took me a long time to put a name on where we actually are, and you've heard me use it all through this book: this is a hell realm. Here's how I know the name fits. When you're living in a world that glorifies vanity over morality, that's how you know you're in the hell realm. Everything here runs on looks, money and status. If you have those, you're treated like a king no matter what kind of person you are. If you don't, you can walk the straight and narrow your whole life and it won't matter. In a world that's full of vanity, if you don't meet those criteria, you're going to be treated like garbage. It's just that simple.

When I was little my grandmother warned me that the wicked outnumber the decent in this world. I thought she was being an old lady. Now I think she was being a prophet. Things of a moral compass do not matter in a hell realm. The people living their best lives are the ones in sync with what this realm rewards, and the people catching hell are the ones who brought morals to a place that doesn't trade in them. People talk about leaving here and going to hell. I believe we're already in hell.

Now here is the strange thing about accepting that. It made me less angry. For years I was frustrated because I thought the world was supposed to run on right and wrong, and it kept not doing that. Once you understand that this world we live in is hell, you won't be so frustrated with life. You stop expecting the game to be fair, and you stop taking it personally when it isn't. That's not giving up. That's seeing clearly. I've made my peace with being the real one.

People talk about leaving here and going to hell. I believe we're already in hell.

And everybody around you is suffering too. They're just hiding it better. I'm not fooled by the fake smiles, and I'm not fooled by the fake laughter, because I'm a good actor myself. You already know about the baby face that has people thinking I'm happy-go-lucky, and the Academy Award I deserve for it. I watched my father come home from work worn down in a way the workday didn't explain. Those were demons. Most people are carrying demons under a poker face, and the ones who judge you for yours have their own.

EVERYBODY DOESN'T HAVE A PURPOSE

Here's the part of this chapter that gets me called negative. I'm going to say it anyway, because the preacher in church isn't going to tell you this. Some people's purpose is to live a painful life and die. That's the truth. Some people's purpose in life is to be an example of what you don't want to be. All of this "purpose driven" talk, all this "chosen one" talk, is for the people who got the good deck. For the rest of us it's a bunch of nonsense dressed up to sound holy. The church told me God has a special plan for your life. All right. For some people the plan is to be homeless up under a bridge. The plan is to never have a woman. The plan is to struggle with money from the day you're born to the day you leave here. If that's the special plan, they can keep it.

Not long ago I talked to a plumber, forty-two years old, never married, no kids. He did everything the purpose crowd tells a man to do. He learned a trade, he goes to work, he pays his own way. And his reward is flying down to Venezuela and other Latin countries and paying women for their company. I'll be honest, it made me think about getting my passport. But it also settled something for me. Just because you're a man on your purpose, that don't mean there's a pot of gold waiting for you at the end of the tunnel. As long as you're doing what you got to do to better your life, that's all that matters. Don't let anybody shame you about the rest.

I don't think the Creator hates anybody. I think he's just not concerned with certain people, the same way society isn't. If you have something of value to bring, you get attention. If you don't, you get written off. I believe in God, I'm not an atheist, but I insist on logic, and the logic is plain. The Creator just didn't pour his champagne out on everybody's life. I look at it as a form of favoritism. It's like chocolate ice cream. I'll eat it, but it's not my favorite. That's about how God looks at most of us. He may care about you, but you're not his favorite. Life ain't fair, we all know that. But if I was the Creator, it would be.

So I ask the question nobody can answer: what's the purpose of being born to live a bad life? What's the point of living your whole life to suffer and to experience nothing but pain and disappointment? What quality of life is that? A buddy of mine used to say some people would have been better off never born, and I used to think that was cruel. I wish like hell I was never here, and I'm sure a lot of you guys wish you were never here as well. If the Creator had given some of us a preview of the life we were about to live, a lot of us would have said no thank you. That's not me being dramatic. That's me being honest about a life that has been, by my own count, ninety-nine percent hell.

That's where my father's rule about children comes in, and it's one of the plainest things he ever told me: "Don't even think about having kids unless you're a millionaire." He meant it. Kids take time, they take money, and raising one is a lifelong job, not an eighteen-year one. He also told me that whatever problems and demons your parents had are going to transfer to you, because the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Put those two together and look at the patterns. If your life has been hellacious, the odds are your children will face the same hell, because you'll pass on what was passed to you. Are you willing to gamble another life on that? Jay-Z's kids are going to be fine, but Jay-Z is one in a million, the luck of the draw. That's why I take antinatalism seriously. If you have endured a lot of suffering and pain in your life, you are a person that

should not procreate. Some people call that cold. I call it the kindest thing you can do for a person who doesn't exist yet.

And when a man says he has no purpose, I don't call him a pessimist. Positive and negative don't exist. The only thing that exists is what's real and what's not. That's just a dose of realness for you. I told you what I value, and I meant it. But purpose, the way the church sells it? At thirty-six I don't have one. I'm just somebody that happened to be here, going through the motions like a lot of us, trying to figure this thing called life out. Being real with myself about not being good enough has given me more contentment than pride and dignity ever did. The ego is what keeps you fighting a truth you already know.

THE NEXT DIMENSION NEEDS TO BE BETTER

I think about the afterlife a lot, more than I used to. I've told you about the Carman concerts my aunt took me to and the nightmares that came after. Church kids are raised on the fear of hell. I'm not afraid anymore. I used to fear death. I don't anymore, because my life has been a disaster. What are they going to do to me on the other side that this realm hasn't already done? My father settled most of that for me years ago, when he told me there's no need to wait for the afterlife to find either one.

But if there is something on the other side, I'll tell you what I'm asking for. God better have something better on the other side. He better, because don't nobody need to live a life of pain and misery and then die and then go to hell. That's not a loving God. Nobody deserves that. People have no control over most of what happened to them here. The life that some people are living on earth ain't it. So it's got to be something better waiting on you in the next dimension.

If I was God, there wouldn't be any hell at all. Everything a person couldn't get on earth, they'd get in the next life. The man who never got love gets love. The man who never got the money gets the money. The

weed, the champagne, the designer clothes, all of it. I'll even tell you what my heaven looks like. Elegant violin and piano. An all-white party. Gold flutes of champagne. I have a Hermès fragrance, *Un Jardin Après la Mousson*, green and dewy, that makes me think about starting a new page, a new chapter, every time I spray it. I'll be honest, I think about the afterlife when I spray it. That's where my hope lives. Not in this realm. In the next one.

I'm not telling you heaven is real. I'm not telling you it isn't. Only the people who have already transitioned know what's over there, and they're not sending reports. I'm telling you what a man who has been through hell has a right to hope for.

IF I COULD START OVER

A viewer asked me once: if you could be reincarnated, would you come back as a ladies' man or an animal? I'd come back human. But I'd come back with a high IQ, a face women actually wanted, and two parents on the same page raising me under one roof. My parents split before I could even talk. My grandparents gave me wisdom, but they couldn't be a father in the house every day. Some of us are behind the eight ball, not from our own fault, but because we didn't have the guidance and the teachings that could have prepared us to be great. Anyone given a second shot would want a better hand. Nobody wants to replay the same reality.

If I could rewind just to my twenties, I'd do a lot differently. I was crazy in my twenties. I'd have approached these topics with more sense, and I'd have learned my trade sooner instead of waiting for my car to break down in 2022 to push me into it. But that's the point of this whole chapter. There is no rewind, and nobody gets a second run.

Here is where I've landed, and it's quieter than you might expect from a man who calls his own life a living disaster. Nobody is coming to tell you the meaning of this. God is not going to explain why he dealt you this

hand. The preacher's book isn't going to make your situation un-jacked. The afterlife, if it's there, is still a long way off. And in the meantime, you're here. You woke up this morning. You still have to live.

So go back to my father's question. What's the purpose of having a life and you do nothing with it? Even if your purpose was never written in the stars, even if the Creator skipped you when he was pouring the champagne, you still have today. Take advantage of the things that you can control in your life, and the things that you can't control, you just say it is what it is. Life is not what you make it. But hope is allowed, as long as it isn't delusion.

Find your outlet. For me it's the dance videos, R&B and classical, the little rush that lifts me out of this place for a minute. For you it might be the gym, a bike, a PlayStation, whatever gets you out of bed. Life has to be more than clocking in and clocking out. Nothing you grind for is coming with you when you go, so if there's anything that brings you some happiness, do that. Your life is already hellacious anyway.

My father has a saying I have carried my whole life: when you have nothing, everything means something. Here at the end, I want you to hear what it means for the rest of a life. The man on the yacht is bored of the yacht. The man who has never had a good week will remember one good dinner for the rest of his life. That's the one advantage the unchosen have in this realm. We never got so much goodness that we stopped feeling it. A sunset, a clean suit, a good fragrance, a Sunday afternoon where nobody bothered you. To a man who was handed everything, those are small things. To us, they're the whole point.

WHAT I'D TELL YOU



- ☛ Nobody can tell you the meaning of life, because nobody else has lived your life.
- ☛ Whatever you value and whatever you love is your meaning, and it doesn't have to match anybody else's.
- ☛ Life is a gift for some people and a curse for others, and you have every right to say which one you got.
- ☛ Life is an experiment you only get to run once, and most of the formula was written before you got here.
- ☛ Once you see that this world rewards vanity over morality, you stop taking its unfairness personally.
- ☛ Everybody doesn't have a purpose, and saying so out loud makes you real, not negative.
- ☛ If your life has been hell, think long and hard before you hand that hand to a child.
- ☛ Whatever comes after this had better be better, because nobody should have to live through hell twice.
- ☛ When you have nothing, everything means something. Go find your something.





CLOSING

YOU STILL HAVE TO LIVE



“When you have nothing, everything means something.”

W e’ve been through all of it now. The world as it is, the years that shaped you, the parents and the relatives and the friends, being alone, the money, the women, the church, the mind, the culture, the ways I get through the days, getting older, the headlines, the hell meter, and finally what it all means. If you read all of that and you’re still here, I want to say one more thing before I let you go.

I never promised you a happy ending. I don’t have one to give. What I’ve got is a man who was told the truth early, who spent years trying to prove it wrong, and who eventually sat down, poured himself a glass, and accepted it. That acceptance didn’t fix anything. It did something better. It gave me peace, and peace is the one thing nobody can take from you once you’ve got it.

I’m thirty-six. I still cook for a living, I’m still finishing the automotive program, and I still don’t have a wife. Nothing in this book changed any of that, and I didn’t write it to tell you I beat the game. I

wrote it so a younger man can hear the truth a little sooner than I did, and so a man my age knows he isn't crazy for seeing what he sees.

So here's what I'd tell you, one last time. Stop waiting on the day everything changes. Go eat the ribeye. Put the cologne on for yourself. Keep your money and your mouth close. Hold on to the one or two people who actually check on you, and let the rest go without a fight. Don't spend another year arguing with what you already know. And when the day comes that something good actually happens, and it will, even in a life of hell, don't be so numb that you miss it. Taste it. Remember it. Let it count.

Everything I know fits on the pages that follow. The Field Guide is the lists from the end of every chapter, all in one place, so you don't have to go looking. After it comes a short glossary of my terms, in case one of them needs explaining. Write the lists down. Read them when you're low. And then go live, because whatever this is, it's the only one you get.

It's your host, Savvy Guy. Thanks for having another Life of Hell conversation with me.

THE FIELD GUIDE

EVERYTHING I'D TELL YOU



The closing lists from every chapter, collected.

I. ACCEPT REALITY

- ☛ Life is not what you make it; it's the cards you were dealt, and most of that hand was settled before you were born.
- ☛ If telling the truth makes you the enemy, then be the enemy.
- ☛ Talent is born, not built, so work with what you have instead of what you wish you had.
- ☛ Work hard anyway, but stop believing effort alone decides who wins.
- ☛ Never go to a winner for advice about losing.
- ☛ Your own track record, from grade school to today, is the most honest witness you will ever have.
- ☛ Accepting the hand you got is what takes the hostility off your heart.
- ☛ Walk the straight and narrow anyway, not for a prize, but because staying out of trouble is a win.

- ☛ If you got the short hand, it's not your fault, and you're not the only one holding it.

2. THE FORMATIVE YEARS

- ☛ Hell starts the day you start liking girls, because that's the day the cliques start handing out labels.
- ☛ The bullies and the cliques never change when they grow up; they just get jobs and car payments.
- ☛ Your appearance is your credentials, and the grown world reads the same ones the lunchroom did.
- ☛ Chasing approval comes from a hole inside you, and no amount of approval ever fills it.
- ☛ Lame with money and a plate of fettuccine beats cool in a cell or a casket.
- ☛ The in crowd charges your real self at the door, and it's never worth the price.
- ☛ If a girl liked you when you had nothing, that was a rare diamond; if nobody did, accept it early so it doesn't break you later.
- ☛ Being overly sheltered makes you green, so learn to read people before the wolves teach you.
- ☛ You don't have nothing to prove to nobody; wear the blazer, read the book, and let them call you Carlton.

3. PARENTS ARE THE BLUEPRINT

- ☛ You are what you come from, and if you were raised by people who knew nothing, your struggle is not your fault.
- ☛ The world is not going to lie to your kid, so you don't need to either.

- ☛ A parent who lies to a child is making an enemy for later.
- ☛ People can only teach you what they know, so find out early what your people actually know.
- ☛ A woman cannot raise a boy to be a man, and a boy without a man in the house will go find one on the block.
- ☛ If the father wants to be there, let him be there, because the child is the one who pays for your spite.
- ☛ If you have real people in your corner, weigh their word above the ones who only tell you what feels good.
- ☛ Listen to your children even when you disagree, because dismissing them is how you lose them.
- ☛ If you don't have money to give your kids, at least have some brains to give them.
- ☛ Let kids be kids: school, sports and fun, not nightmares about the devil.

4. FAMILY ARE THOSE WHO SHOW CONCERN

- ☛ Just because somebody is related to you does not mean they care for you.
- ☛ When is the last time your family contacted you? If you have to think about it, you have your answer.
- ☛ Silence is not busyness; people make time for whoever they actually care about.
- ☛ Give relatives the same energy they give you, because a last name is not an exemption.
- ☛ Relatives size you up by your looks, your money and your status like anybody else, and they have the download on you.

- ☛ Anybody who let your phone sit silent while you struggled gets the voicemail when you prosper.
- ☛ Don't go where you're not wanted; it costs you your peace, and it can cost you more than that.
- ☛ For the holidays, let somebody bring you a plate and eat it at your own table in peace.
- ☛ Family is whoever shows concern for you when there's nothing in it for them, so hold on to those people.
- ☛ If you have a close-knit family that loves you, cherish it, because a lot of us never got one.

5. CHOOSE THEM WISELY

- ☛ A fake friend is worse than a real enemy, because at least the enemy tells you where you stand.
- ☛ People don't turn into enemies overnight; they were enemies all along, and you just found out.
- ☛ Anybody who needs you to change how you dress and how you talk before he'll call you a friend is not your friend.
- ☛ Befriend people on your level who carry your same demons, and stop pouring yourself into glasses that are already full.
- ☛ Don't go out of your way to be nice; neutral and cordial will keep you safer than friendly ever did.
- ☛ Consider the source, and take instruction only from people who can back up what they say.
- ☛ Keep your problems, your dreams and your business to yourself unless the listener has lived your same dilemma.

- ☛ One red flag means more are coming, so don't hand anybody a second chance to burn you.
- ☛ Fall back and stop calling for a while; the ones who call you are the ones worth keeping.
- ☛ It might get lonely being alone, but one solid buddy and your own company beat a crowd of pretenders.

6. BETTER TO BE ALONE THAN IN BAD COMPANY

- ☛ Nobody is introverted by choice; if you pulled back from people, it's because people gave you a reason.
- ☛ You can't argue by yourself, and nobody ever caught a charge over a fight he had alone in his apartment.
- ☛ Isolation is the best medication for a man who's been done wrong.
- ☛ When the vibe is off, it's off, and you don't owe anybody the benefit of the doubt.
- ☛ Use the quiet to plan your moves like a chess game, and stop living to please people who aren't living to please you.
- ☛ If you're going to have a circle at all, build it out of men who know your kind of hell, and still test the waters.
- ☛ Alone is not the same as hiding, so bowl, skate, swim and eat out by yourself, and let nobody call it sad.
- ☛ Any man who says he's fine being alone forever is coping, so be honest about what you want even while you protect your peace.
- ☛ If you find one person without the devil in them, you got lucky, so hold on to them.

7. MONEY IS EVERYTHING

- ☛ Money is not the root of all evil. Being dead broke is.
- ☛ Before you take advice that money isn't everything, look at the bank account of the person giving it.
- ☛ An average salary used to buy a life, and in 2026 it barely covers rent; that is math, not laziness.
- ☛ Where you start is luck, so never let anybody tell you that you just didn't want it bad enough.
- ☛ You don't need to be a millionaire; you need things that make money while you sleep.
- ☛ Keep the job that pays the rent until the dream pays more, and remember the job will only ever get you by.
- ☛ Walmart is fine and designer is optional; if you can't afford it, you just can't afford it.
- ☛ Pay the bills first and then buy the bottle, because a life that is only bills is not a life.
- ☛ Money lets you choose your company, and the people who only show up when you're winning don't get a seat.

8. KNOW WHERE YOU STAND

- ☛ If you have to guess whether she likes you, she doesn't; a woman who wants you makes it plain.
- ☛ Swagger is what a boy gets back from girls smiling at him, so don't blame yourself for missing what you were never given.

- ☛ A woman who tells you before the date that she won't be dressed her best is telling you where you stand.
- ☛ Money can get you tolerated but never wanted; the investor pays, and the investment gets chosen.
- ☛ Chemistry is there or it isn't, and no gym, wardrobe or personality makeover puts it there.
- ☛ When someone has no answer for your situation, the honest thing is to say so, because false hope is the worst medicine there is.
- ☛ Keep your hobbies for what they're for: they won't bring you a woman, but they'll keep your head on straight.
- ☛ Being passed over by women doesn't make you lazy, so work, study and stack your money anyway.
- ☛ Talk about this only with men who live it; everybody else will argue or walk away.
- ☛ You can know exactly where you stand and still not hate the man in the mirror.

9. LOVE COMES WITH A PRICE

- ☛ Love is not free, and anybody who tells a young man it is should have to explain why some men die without a taste of it.
- ☛ Watch what she does, not what she says; her actions will tell you everything her mouth won't.
- ☛ Some men get women and some men buy women, and there's no shame in knowing which one you are.
- ☛ Make your interest known a couple of times, and if nothing comes back, leave it alone; begging never turned a no into a yes.

- ☛ The older men mean well, but their advice was built for a time when a brickmason could raise a family.
- ☛ Stop measuring yourself against the married men of your father's generation; they were dealt a different hand.
- ☛ If you marry, sign the prenup; if she won't sign, walk, and know you just saved yourself.
- ☛ Lust is not a sin, it's the proof you're a man; the church had that backwards and it cost me years.
- ☛ Don't envy the couple on the beach, because you don't go home with them.
- ☛ Build the Valentine's Day you'd have in your head in full detail, and don't let the holiday tell you what you are.

10. WHY I LEFT THE CHURCH

- ☛ Ask yourself what church actually did for you, and if the honest answer is nothing, stop giving it your Sundays.
- ☛ If you have been praying for the same thing for years and it has not come, stop praying for it and go do something about it.
- ☛ Faith without works is dead, and the works are the only part that ever paid me.
- ☛ God has favorites, and pretending otherwise just makes you blame yourself for things you never controlled.
- ☛ If there is a hell after this life, for a lot of us it will only be part two.
- ☛ Nobody has seen the big bad devil, but you will meet plenty of people doing his work, some of them in the pews.
- ☛ You can believe in God without belonging to a church, a title or a pastor's business.

- ☛ Any teaching that tells you to stop using your own understanding is a teaching to walk away from.
- ☛ Guilt and fear are heavy things to carry, and you do not owe either one to anybody for being a man.

11. THE MINDSET IS AN ARCHIVE

- ☛ Your mind is an archive, and it plays back what life recorded on it, not what you wish was there.
- ☛ Confidence comes from the wins stored in that archive, and you can't cook with cold grease.
- ☛ How people perceive you is how they will treat you, and that treatment is what fills your archive.
- ☛ Don't judge a man's attitude until you know the scenes that played in his movie.
- ☛ Take responsibility for what you can control and refuse the blame for what you can't.
- ☛ When somebody answers you with "that's your truth," he has stopped arguing and started dodging.
- ☛ Never argue with someone who denies what he knows is true; let him state his piece and keep moving.
- ☛ Question what you were taught, even when it came from people who loved you.
- ☛ Don't be ashamed of what you didn't know at fifteen; be ashamed only if you refuse to learn it now.

12. IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF THE WORLD

- ☛ You can't fake where you come from, so stop trying to be a street dude when you were raised in a cul-de-sac.
- ☛ If the culture only gives you two options, pretty boy or hood dude, refuse both and build your own lane.
- ☛ Street credibility won't buy groceries, won't get you a job and won't keep you out of a cell.
- ☛ Rap is entertainment for everybody else and a lifestyle for us, so watch what you let into your spirit.
- ☛ The hive will call you a sellout for leveling up; take the label and keep climbing.
- ☛ Admire a celebrity's talent if you want, but never worship a man like he's God.
- ☛ Give people their flowers while they're alive, and don't make up stories at anybody's funeral.
- ☛ Your grandparents' rules can be good and still not fit this place, so stop waiting for your decency to get paid back.
- ☛ Equality was never real, and the sooner you stop believing in it the sooner you stop blaming yourself.
- ☛ Stay decent anyway, and make elegance the standard instead of the hood.

13. TURN YOUR PAIN INTO CHAMPAGNE

- ☛ Pour the worst thing in your life into the best glass you can find, and toast to the pain if success never showed up.

- ☛ An idle mind is the devil's workshop, so give yours somewhere to go every day, even if it's only a walk with a bottle of water.
- ☛ Go out to live, not to hunt; the best moments at a wine bar are the ones you didn't go there looking for.
- ☛ Find the outlet that hits like dopamine for you, whether it's dancing, skating or a treadmill, and lean on it hardest on the bad days.
- ☛ Love what you love, the fragrance, the suit, the recipe, the song, and don't let anybody shame you out of it or sell it to you as a way to get a woman.
- ☛ Nobody is going to treat you, so plan your own treats, and plan them first for Christmas and Valentine's Day.
- ☛ Pick a cope that builds you up, like a trade or a few dollars in stocks, over one that tears you down, and never bash the man who couldn't find one.
- ☛ Book the table for one and the cruise for one; being unchosen is no reason to press pause.
- ☛ Raise a glass to the people you've lost, because champagne is for remembering as much as celebrating.

14. THE BEAUTY OF GETTING OLDER

- ☛ The clock doesn't care whether you're ready, so stop waiting on a season that isn't coming.
- ☛ Every birthday puts you closer to the grave; let that be the thing that gets you moving.
- ☛ Forgive the man you were in your twenties, as long as you aren't still him at forty.

- ☛ Once you're past thirty, nobody who hasn't lived your life gets to tell you your perception is wrong, not even your mother.
- ☛ Showing off is for teenagers; a grown man only has to impress himself.
- ☛ People get older without getting different, so trust the patterns you've already seen.
- ☛ Start eating like a grown man now, before a doctor hands you a reason to.
- ☛ The pain doesn't leave in your thirties; you just learn to carry it without falling apart in public.
- ☛ Learn a skill, put a few dollars away, and buy the nice thing for you, not for an audience.
- ☛ Age in experiences and in your mind, not just in numbers.

15. LESSONS FROM THE HEADLINES

- ☛ If a man put his hands on you once, he'll do it again, and the time to leave was the first time.
- ☛ Don't let anybody move in with you or around your children until they have proven who they are over time.
- ☛ Make people prove their loyalty before you let them into your personal world.
- ☛ No argument is worth a life; walk away and say what you need to say after you've cooled off.
- ☛ If a woman tells you no, leave it alone, and if a woman makes you want to put your hands on her, get away from her.
- ☛ If you know a place is prone to violence, don't go, no matter who calls you a sellout for it.

- ☛ Never argue with the police in the street; comply, survive, and fight it in a courtroom.
- ☛ A person can look normal and be one bad day from snapping, so give strangers nothing to react to.
- ☛ Rejection and loneliness can explain a man's pain, but they never excuse taking it out on anybody.
- ☛ You can restart a video game; you can't restart real life.

16. THE HELL METER

- ☛ Forget zero; get the needle down to 40 and call that a win.
- ☛ Go somewhere you've never been, because a new place can move the needle when nothing else will.
- ☛ Know the holidays and Valentine's are coming, and have somewhere to be before they hit.
- ☛ Limit the scrolling, because comparing yourself to the halo-effect crowd is a game you can't win.
- ☛ Numb is not healed, so let the pressure out with somebody you trust before it comes out on its own.
- ☛ One glass to salute the pain, never a bottle to forget it.
- ☛ Cut off the people who raise the needle and hold on to the honest ones who lower it.
- ☛ Check your meter the way you check your oil, honestly and often.

17. THE MEANING OF EXISTENCE

- ☛ Nobody can tell you the meaning of life, because nobody else has lived your life.

- ☛ Whatever you value and whatever you love is your meaning, and it doesn't have to match anybody else's.
- ☛ Life is a gift for some people and a curse for others, and you have every right to say which one you got.
- ☛ Life is an experiment you only get to run once, and most of the formula was written before you got here.
- ☛ Once you see that this world rewards vanity over morality, you stop taking its unfairness personally.
- ☛ Everybody doesn't have a purpose, and saying so out loud makes you real, not negative.
- ☛ If your life has been hell, think long and hard before you hand that hand to a child.
- ☛ Whatever comes after this had better be better, because nobody should have to live through hell twice.
- ☛ When you have nothing, everything means something. Go find your something.

GLOSSARY

THE WORDS I USE



If you are new to the channel, here is what I mean when I say these things.

Life of Hell. The name of the channel and the way I describe my life and a lot of yours. It doesn't mean every day is bad. It means the deck was stacked, and you still have to play.

Hell realm. This world, the way it actually works. The more in tune you get with life, the more you understand we are already living in it.

The hell meter. How much hell you are carrying right now, from 0 to 100. You can't get it to zero. You can get it from 100 down to about 40.

Life of Hell conversation. What I call each video. No script, no guests, just me telling you what I've seen.

The in crowd. The popular people you were desperate to fit in with in middle school and high school. By your thirties that should be out of your system.

Square. A man who doesn't play the street role. Clean-cut, raised in church, collared shirts. It's okay to be square. It can keep you alive and out of a cell.

Suburban brother. A Black man who came up in the suburbs, not the hood. He never learned the street element, so a lot of the culture treats him like an outsider.

Hood. A mentality more than a zip code: street credibility over education, loud over classy, the gangster image over the grown man.

Select and non-select men. Select men are the ones women choose: the looks, the money, the status. Non-select men are everybody else. I say they live on planets so far apart you'd need a NASA spacecraft to get from one to the other.

Choosing signals. The signs a woman gives a man she is attracted to, so he knows he can step to her. If you never got them, that tells you where you stand.

Looks, money and status. The three things this world actually rewards. Personality and being a good person come a distant fourth.

The halo effect. When a person is good-looking, rich or famous, people overlook their worst qualities and give them the benefit of the doubt.

The horn effect. The opposite. When you are not attractive, people assume the worst about you before you open your mouth.

Melanated. My word for being a Black person. My father told me early that it would mean a harder road.

Demon time. When people are wicked, careless and quick to snap, with no regard for anybody. A lot of folks are on demon time.

Receipts. Proof from real life. If somebody gives you advice about a life they have never lived, ask for their receipts.

Consider the source. My father's rule. Before you take advice, look at the life of the person giving it.

Water seeks its own level. My grandfather's rule. People end up around people like them, so keep company with those who share your reality.

Positive cope. Something you do to get through the hell that doesn't destroy you: dancing, a workout, a skill, a small investment. A destructive cope is the opposite.

The Most High. What I call God now. I still believe in a higher power. I just don't believe in the church.

Keep it a hundred. Be completely honest. On this channel we keep it all the way a hundred.

Life is a timed art. My father's phrase. There's a time for everything, and if you miss your time, you don't get it back.



A NOTE BEFORE YOU GO



Some of what I talk about in this book is heavy. If you are carrying more than you can hold right now, don't hold it by yourself. Talk to somebody: a friend, a relative who shows concern, a doctor, anybody who will listen.

If you are in the United States, you can call or text **988**, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time of day or night. Outside the U.S., your local emergency number or a crisis line in your country can connect you with someone.

Holding emotional pain inside will break you down. Reaching out is not weakness. It's how you take the needle down.

THE TRUTH IS NOT NEGATIVE.

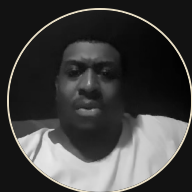


Life of Hell is a book about living in a world that does not play fair. It is built from more than a thousand late-night conversations by Savvy Guy, a man who was told the truth about his life at fourteen, spent years trying to prove it wrong, and finally sat down, poured a glass, and accepted it.

Chapter by chapter he walks through the parents who shaped him, the relatives who did not show up, the friends who turned out to be strangers, money, attraction, the church he left, and the mind that keeps a record of all of it. There is no program here and no promise of a happy ending. There is a man telling you what he has seen, and what he still does to get through the days.

This is not a book about winning. It is about knowing where you stand, and living anyway.

SAVVY GUY



Savvy Guy is the host of Life of Hell Inc, a YouTube channel of unscripted talks about life, truth and survival. He lives in the suburbs, studies automotive, and believes a good fragrance and a glass of champagne can take the hell meter from one hundred down to forty.

youtube.com/@savvyguy4180

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