

Chapter 1

I was born in 1966. We lived in the projects in Newark, New Jersey. It was a troubled time for the city. Soon after I was born, there were huge race riots in Newark. The riots lasted for six days, and when they were over, two dozen people were dead. My mom remembers walking around our apartment holding me while police helicopters flew so low they could shine their searchlights through our windows. There was a curfew declared, and Mom was worried that Dad would come home from work late and get caught by the police.

Any black man out after curfew would be in danger. But Mom worried that Dad would be a special target because of his size. His name was Anderson Walker, but everybody called him “Big.”

He stood 6 foot 7 and weighed 320 pounds. My mom, too, is tall and stately. She tells me, “You couldn’t help but be big.” She was right. An average newborn baby weighs six or seven pounds, but when I was born I weighed almost 13. As a toddler, I was so big and strong that I’d knock my playpen



over while I was in it, then lift it up and crawl out of it. I didn’t want to be left alone in that pen. I wanted to be with my mom.

I was a mama’s boy, but I was very close to my father, too. She and he and my older brother Ricky (I called him “Icky”) were my whole world. My dad had left school in 11th grade and gone to work, first as a warehouse worker, and then as a school police officer. But he never stopped educating himself. When I think of my father, I imagine him with a book in his hand. He loved reading about history, especially war history. When the book *Roots* came out, about a black family’s history from slave times on, he read it cover to cover.

My memories of my father are bittersweet. He was a loving man. When he'd have to discipline me physically, he cried afterward. He taught me to be a loving father. Yet he left us when I was 7. After that, he was in and out of my life. He died of diabetes when I was 15.

To her credit, my mother never spoke badly of him. When I would complain about him not being around, she'd say, "That man loves you." And I know he did. Once when he was around, he took me to my cousin Troy's. Dad told me to stay in the yard, but instead, Troy and I took off. Dad came looking for me. I remember seeing him, all six and a half feet of him, coming up the sidewalk roaring, "Where's Rod? Rod, where are you?" When we got home, I heard him telling my mom, "I thought I lost him." He was sobbing. I was amazed; a big man like that, crying over me!

So even though he wasn't always there, and even though we didn't have the perfect family, he made me feel a father's love.

Chapter 2

My parents' people had come up North from Alabama, Virginia, and South Carolina, looking for work. My mom's mother was a domestic in white families' homes. My grandfather worked in a factory. They were very poor. When he was a young man, my grandfather went out looking for coal to heat his house. He followed a coal truck and picked up what fell out onto the street. A police officer saw what he was doing and shot him. My grandmother cut the bullet out. For the rest of his life, Grandpa would lift up his shirt, show the scar, and say, "Look what my woman did for me!"

Back then, black folks like my grandparents came up from the South to escape the poverty of the countryside. Now, we're facing the problems of the city. City life was my mother's greatest worry.

She says, “My biggest challenge raising you and Ricky was saving you from the streets.” She feared for us every day. Every mother worries about her children, but living in Newark, she worried every time we went out the door that we would die out there. She’d tell me, “You’re big boys; you’ll attract attention. You have to learn to keep yourself safe by being well rounded. You need every kind of smarts there are—street smarts, book smarts, and mother wit.”

I tell you what—since those days, I have studied with some great sociologists. My professors knew all about how society and groups work. But Joan Sutton was my first sociology teacher. She was talking to me about those things before I ever dreamed of college. She knew that a black man faced special challenges in life. She knew that a *big* black man, especially, was going to be seen as threatening.

That happened earlier than even she expected. When I began kindergarten, I was already taller than my teacher. One day my mother saw me on the playground, sitting off by myself. She asked, “Why is my child over there alone?” The teacher answered, “He’s too big. We don’t want him playing with the others in case they get hurt.” I was only 5.

At the time, Mom was working as an X-ray technician at a hospital. You know what she did?

On her lunch break, she'd take the city bus all the way to my school and spend recess with me. She said, "*I will play with him.*" And when the other kids saw the fun we were having, they came and played with us. My mom wasn't going to have her baby sitting on the sidewalk alone.

That's the kind of love that got me through.

Of course, that wasn't the end of the problems. When I was in first grade, my teacher, a young white woman, called Mom to say she wanted to suspend me. She told my mom that I'd asked to go to the bathroom and she had said no. "And then Rod stood up and looked me in the eye and said he was going," this woman reported. "I just felt so threatened!"

I was 6, and this college-educated adult had already decided I was a dangerous black man.