

INTRODUCTION

I always believed that I would die on death row. Where that thought developed, who knows, but it was there as far back as I could recall, six or seven years old even. I recall telling a teacher that I could never be president, and when asked why, I told her, "Because they would kill me because I was black"; I was less than ten years old at the time.

I recall my dad asking, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

I said, "A cop."

"Nah...you may get shot," Dad said.

Later, he asked the same question, and I said, "A pilot."

"Nah," Dad said, "your eyes are too bad."

By the time I got to high school, I had absolutely no idea what the fuck I wanted to be besides the motherfucker who ran that bitch (leader of the cool kids). I eventually ran that shit, too.

The block I lived on, in Bushwick, Brooklyn, was pretty close-knit, interesting families. We all looked out for each other. Many of the young people I grew up with from that block, in Brooklyn, would all reunite as adults in various maximum-security prisons across the state of New York.

I attended P.S. 299 for elementary school. My home life was pretty good, but I always felt crowded at home, too many people there, not enough space: eight kids, mother and father in a three-bedroom apartment, in Bushwick, Brooklyn, New York. I often preferred the streets. In the streets, however, you had to be alert, so I carried my knife, 007, razor sharp, as far back as I could recall, seven or eight years old.

My neighborhood had numerous gangs, and sometimes they marched the streets, in ranks, 100 deep. There were the Tomahawks, Savage Skulls, and Savage Nomads, to name a few. I saw them beat down many people, badly.

I formed my own crew at elementary school, and we practiced sequential marching in the schoolyard during recess and lunch break. It was only the guys from my fifth grade class but still I understood early on that there was a need for togetherness; I was voted the leader. My second in command (DJ) some years later reportedly killed a man and was given a life prison sentence. Unbeknownst to me, he and I were on Rikers Island together as teenagers, but he was using his street name, not his real name that I knew him by. He was a notorious inmate on Rikers Island too, and his street name struck terror in the hearts of many motherfuckers.

Away from school and on my block, I rarely hung out with kids my age. I mostly hung with the older guys. We formed a gang there too, just the guys from the block, "Cornelia Street Demons." Being the youngest in the clique, I was not the leader but I was respected still.

There was always rivalry between the neighborhood blocks, i.e. Cornelia Street versus Jefferson or Madison. Madison was a tough block; many well respected young guys came from that block. Often, in the summer time, our entire block, so it seemed, girls and guys, would hit the park to engage in battles (usually friendly) with the other neighborhood blocks.

Our toughest elementary school guys would battle, (one-on-one) wrestling, their toughest elementary school guys. Then middle school, then high school and the girls and other guys from your respective block would cheer for you as in the gladiator days; it was crazy fun. We would thereafter all return to the block and recount our wins and losses, congratulating the winners and laughing and clowning the losers hard. It was all in fun, though, and those were definitely fun times.

We all stuck together, on the block and when we ventured off of the block. Summer times were the best. School was out for the year, daylight lasted a long time, ice cream trucks stayed on the block, and we played all kinds of games. We played basketball, handball, football, cocolevio, tag, tops, skelley, cards, just having fun. In the wintertime, we built snowmen and had wild, fun snowball fights; often times it was the guys against the girls or the older kids against the younger kids on the block.

Also, on my block, there was a categorization based upon family affiliations. On my block many were known by their families' names, Chapmens, Leftwich, Mimms, etc. Some family names were notorious, others pleasant, others tragic. There were many family tragedies among the families on my block. Looking back, almost every family known to me had suffered some form of tragedy, be it a killing, severe drug addiction, domestic violence, extreme alcoholism, or long-time incarceration. Everybody on the block too was very poor; that too was a fucking tragedy.

My dad was individually well respected in the neighborhood. He was a strong, principled man. He was a long-time married man, no drinking, partying, or drugging, as many of the older folks of that time were doing.

My dad, too, was a product of the South, and he was raised with many of the Southern principles about family, community, and manhood. He lived by those principles and tried to impart them to his children. My dad was a man who would literal kill a motherfucker or die trying for his family. Most folks on my block knew it too, and they usually acted accordingly.

My dad kept guns in the home, many of them. Many folks in my neighborhood, they knew that shit too. Most folks in the neighborhood, of all ages, had a healthy respect for my dad, for a

number of reasons, and thus, they too respected his children. I was given a lot of respect in the neighborhood while growing up; I was Mr. Lloyd-Bey's son. I was actually never comfortable being respected because of a relationship with anything or anyone, I always desired for people to respect me because of who I was as an individual, period.

My friends of all ages too respected my father. They loved to talk to him, and he loved them back. Many of my friends and other young men in the neighborhood had no father in the home, or their father was unknown to them. They thus openly respected the fact that I did.

My father became to many of them a respected role model. My father, being conscious of the state of affairs in the black community, embraced the role and became a mentor and inspiration to many young men in the neighborhood. Some of the toughest of the tough, the real bad boys of the neighborhood, looked up to my father.

My father held many jobs in my memory, he always worked hard. He was a city bus driver for most of my childhood. Those Southern principles about the man being the provider and protector of his family were serious with my dad.

My dad also was taking night classes at Brooklyn College, while working full-time, eventually earning his bachelor's degree. He went on to earn two master's degrees, while still working full-time, raising eight kids, and caring for his wife.

My dad left the bus driver job and went on to work as a para-professional for the Board of Education and thereafter became a high school teacher. He also would sell wares that came in from Africa, various woodwork and sculptures he received from his cousin Chuck, who was a merchant marine. He also made and sold various incenses, as well as custom jewelry that was made by one of his good friends.

Still, he never made enough to really accomplish all the things he wanted to do for his wife and children, and that definitely bothered him. I recognized this frustration early on and thus I rarely asked for anything. As a kid, I recall always being fascinated with the stars and I wanted to study astronomy. I once asked my dad to buy me a telescope, and with the most pained expression on his face he told me that he could not afford it. I never asked my father to purchase me anything else after that. I figured that I had to find other ways to get what I wanted on my own.

So, at around eight years old, I would get up on Saturday and Sunday mornings at 6:00 A.M., wash, fix breakfast, leave the house by 7:00 A.M. to get to the neighborhood supermarket some blocks away to pack grocery bags for the cashiers. You had to arrive early or other kids would already have your place at the register, and you'd be out. I always arrived as the store was opening.

I would work from 8:00 A.M., when the store opened, to 6:00 P.M., or right before closing time. Often I came home with a pocket filled with quarters, dimes, half dollars, and a couple of bills mixed in. Sometimes, I came home practically broke, after a ten-hour shift, pockets practically empty, if people were not tipping that day.

My mom was always an amazing woman in my eyes, she was before her time. Mom was a homemaker, raising the children and keeping house. She was a very strong woman and a woman whom many of the girls in the neighborhood gravitated to. I loved my mom dearly and had a good relationship with her as a kid and a great relationship with her as an adult. I hated to see her without, because I sensed early on that she had the spirit of abundance, but economically, she did not have all she desired. I rarely asked her for money as far back as I can recall. I could never take the little she had and often offered her what I had, if I had anything to offer.

My parents both converted to Islam before I was born, thus, my name, Abdul. The conversion gave my parents and my family a novelty on the block; traditional Islam was pretty new to the African American community at that time. Both parents taught the religious principles to people in the neighborhood and converted a number of them to Islam. The principles of love of the Lord, self-sufficiency, love of self, family, and community were welcome ideas in a neighborhood that was cluttered with violence, alcohol, drugs, and self-destructive behavior.

I was introduced to the Mosque and the Muslim community as far back as I could remember. I was therefore raised around people from all over the world: whites, Hispanics, Asians, and Africans. Under Islam, we were all brothers and sisters, so racism and prejudice was a foreign teaching to me. I knew it existed, but it was something we were taught never to embrace.

My father always wanted to have a house for his children, rather than an apartment, and when he found the chance to rent a home in Far Rockaway, Queens, he jumped on it. Moving to Queens was hard for me. So many friends and memories in Bushwick, Brooklyn, it was hard to move away. Yet, the last day in Bushwick was crazy fun. After the moving truck was totally packed, my friends and I were all in the hallway of my building reminiscing, laughing and cracking jokes, playing the dozens.

Kelroy, Bugsy (who I would later meet in prison), Donna, and Lamont were in the hallway that day. Kelroy said his niece, Donna, who had buck teeth and was wearing furry high boots, looked like a "Russian rabbit with boots." On and on the jokes went throughout the night, hilarious and memorable.

My dad was ready to go, so I said my painful goodbyes. I climbed slowly into the moving truck, and we pulled off heading to Queens, leaving my hood and all of its pitfalls and distractions behind, or so we thought.