

## The Genesis: “My Up-bringing”

### Chapter 1

My birth was the same as millions of Black youth in Amerikkka: a debate between an expecting Black mother and her relatives as to whether or not the child she was carrying should be born in the first place. From the stories told to me, my maternal grandmama, Minnie Lee Ruffin was dead-set on her daughter having an abortion. However, my paternal grandmama, Mary Lee Carter, once told me that while I was in my mama’s womb, she went so far as to go on the radio and make a plea for me to be born. When I asked my mama about this, she said it was true but it still had no bearing on her decision to give birth to me. It was her sheer determination to give birth to her first child that finally persuaded her mama to give her blessing regarding my birth. Nevertheless, in my grandmama giving her blessing, she had one small request: that I be named “**Hope**,” as in “**Hope like hell that he doesn’t turn out like his daddy.**” I was born on February 15, 1973, and was named Joseph Lee Ruffin, after my mama’s father.

My mama’s parents were Joseph Walter Lester and Minnie Lee Ruffin. I really don’t know the history, but, from the bits and pieces I have gathered over the years, I discovered that she was married to John Henry Ruffin. During their marriage, she had given birth to eight of his children. Two died at an early age. My actual grandfather, Joseph, began a relationship with my grandmama at a vulnerable time in her life. They met in the 1940s, which were hard times for Black folk. Despite my grandmama being married to the man she had eight children with, my blood grandfather was still willing to love and support her. As a result of their relationship, my mama was conceived. They lived together for a short time, until my grandma’s husband John was released from a mental institution. In the wider community, their relationship wasn’t accepted because of the fact that my grandmama had cheated on her husband with my grandfather, which dispelled any assumption that my mama was a product of my grandmama and her husband’s relationship. (Always in secret, it was alluded to amongst some of my family members that my grandmama’s last three children were actually fathered by my grandfather, not her husband.)

My grandfather and my great-uncle Nehemiah were the only productive men that I would have direct contact with during the earlier years of my life. Uncle Nehemiah married my grandfather’s sister Ann; he was a couple of years younger than my grandfather. My granddaddy spoiled the mess out of my mama, his only child. When I came into this world, he extended the same unconditional love to me. Where my granddaddy would let me get away with a lot of stuff, my uncle Nehemiah wouldn’t. Uncle Nehemiah was tall and slim in stature, and he always treated me fair as long as I was obedient and performed the chores that he had selected for me to do each day. Even though my grandfather was in his late 70s and physically unable to get around independently, he and I still had some joyous times together and shared a lot of special moments. My fondest memories were going to get our weekly haircuts and feasting on McDonald’s food. He would order his favorite meal, a fish sandwich, and I would order a Big Mac. He would buy me whatever my heart desired. In his eyes, I could do no wrong.

I also remember how much he loved the Detroit Tigers. I would watch him lie in the bed and listen to all their games on the radio. Sometimes, I would even sit with him and listen to the games. As a testament to his influence over me, I didn't care for listening to the games on the radio, but did it because I just enjoyed spending time with him. (I know, as he now resides in the Afrikan Village of Eternity, he got a kick out of the Tiger's 2006 season.) The death of my grandfather was so devastating; I believe that's where everything went south for me. It was 1984; I was eleven-years-old. Though, at the time, I cried rivers for days, my heart and soul continues to cry out for him. Up to that point in my life, he was my parachute and security in this world. It's hard to explain how important he was to me. I never thought about his impact on my life until I began to write out my thoughts. Honestly, the word "family" has never had any significant meaning to me outside of my grandfather, great uncle, my mama's mama, my mama, my aunt, and my two sisters. They were the only ones that acted like a family to me on a consistent basis.

I never had any real contact with my father's family; the only meaningful relationship that was cultivated between us was because of grandmama. I met my father's father, and even had spent a few nights at his house, but no meaningful relationship was ever developed between us. Subconsciously, I was looking for my father's father to fill the void that my father had left in my life, but, for whatever reason, he never measured up. To be honest, I was probably holding him to unfair and unrealistic expectations based upon the relationship I had developed with my mama's father.

My mama, Ava Jo Ruffin, was 15-years-old when she gave birth to me; my father, Richard Lee Carter was 17-years-old. Their relationship was doomed from the start. Neither one of them had any sense of what direction they were planning to take in life, so their relationship was based solely upon physical lust. "That nigga was only good for a piece of good dick." These were my mama's words of my father, and she was never hesitant to share this with me. Right before I was born, or sometime thereafter, my father left for the Navy. My mama has expressed to me that on one of his furloughs, he brought a woman back with him, and that killed any chance of them ever pursuing a long-term relationship. My father's version is that he called home one day to find out that my mama had married another man. For whatever reason, knowing the truth of why my parents weren't together was of no real concern to me. Actually, I don't remember ever seeing my parents together as a couple, and this would have a lasting effect on me. I never had any point of reference as to witnessing a solid, working relationship between a man and a woman. When my mama did talk about my father, she rarely had anything good to say about him, except that he had never put his hands on her in a harmful way. I was proud to hear this because, up to that point, every man I had seen my mama with physically and emotionally abused her.

Between the ages of three and seven, I really have no vivid recollections of my father in my life. During this time, I recall being over other family members house that stayed by my father's father house. When I would be over there, I would run into people that knew him. They would mention how much I looked/acted like my father. Hearing all this gave me the mental reference of who my father was, and I would mold myself according to the information I gathered from people that knew my father.

I had to be around the age of eight when my father started picking me up on a regular basis. During this time, he introduced me to my little brothers Richard Jr. and Bruce. He would pick us up on the weekends, or sometimes he would just take me. I always looked forward to these trips because they were very adventurous to me. For the most part, my father would drive us around the City of Detroit. As I reflect on those times my brothers and I spent with my father, I believe that he related to us more like our big brother than our father. We were always on the go when we were at his house, and, when he did sit down to talk with us, it was designed to cultivate our mental development, to enable us to survive on the mean streets of Detroit.

One time, my father left my brothers and me in his house by ourselves, and there were some girls that stayed across the street that we liked. We liked them so much that we pulled down our pants to impress them. One of my father's neighbors witnessed what we had done and immediately told him when he returned. He gave us an old school ass whipping, making us take a bath first—and then whipping us! We were rebellious, though. We were always pushing the envelope. For instance, we were not allowed to eat candy at my father's house. So, when my brothers and I would go to the store, I would steal candy for us. We would hide with our sweets under the front porch and devour the stolen treats.

Then there was a time when he took us to one of his relative's house. It was late at night. My brother Richard was sleep. To keep myself busy, a cousin and I poured alcohol on my brother and set him on fire. Neither one of us were actually aware of the damage we could have done to my brother. We were just trying to have fun. My father's discipline consisted of punching me and my cousin in our chests.

I also remember one time when my brothers and I were riding with my father, and, as we sat in the car, he conducted a deal with a guy. Something went wrong and my father started shooting. He said nothing to us about what had happened, and we didn't ask him anything about it. It was accepted behavior. At any rate, he always took us with him wherever he went, and we witnessed some very harrowing events during these excursions.

I have somewhat vivid images of my interactions with my father, especially when it was just me and him. I remember one particular weekend when he asked me if I wanted to fight him. I was like "Yeah." So, we began to fight. My father was a martial arts expert, and he kicked me every time I ran towards him. I don't know what made him ask me if I wanted to fight him, or even what made me say yes to his proposition. I guess my combative nature had begun to take root and it was in dire need of being cultivated. I fought my father with all my heart. With him recognizing the warrior spirit in me, he allowed me to fight him because he didn't want to break that spirit. Being born a "70s baby," I was a huge Bruce Lee fan. With my middle name being "Lee," coupled with my father's knowledge of martial arts, I thought, like every other little boy of that era, that I was going to be the next Bruce Lee—and I never hesitated to test my Bruce Lee skills on other children.

My father was always introducing my brothers and me to new things. He taught us the importance of exercising and eating right. My father stayed on the eastside of Detroit and he was an avid runner. He would take my brothers and me with him on many of his runs at Belle Isle, a

local park, and he would leave us blocks behind. He didn't need to worry about anything happening to us because he left his well-trained dog, Mister, to run with us. My brothers and I were always determined to finish the run, even though it felt like we had been running forever.

As for his dietary philosophy, my father always told me about not eating pork. He said the pig ate any and everything. I was all in, especially when he got to describing the worms that are in the pig. When he took me home that Sunday night, I couldn't wait to tell my mama what I had learned. "Mama I ain't eatin' pork no more," I said. "My daddy told me it comes from a nasty animal that eats anything." Those were my exact words to her. I don't know where I got the courage to say such a thing to her, and I was surprised she didn't knock me silly. Her reply was simply; "Well, boy, when your daddy starts buyin' food in *my house*, your Black ass can stop eatin' pork. Until then, you gonna eat whatever I buy and cook." That was the last time we had that discussion.

One of the lasting impressions my father left on my young mind before he stopped picking me up was when he went and got the biggest boy from the neighborhood for me to wrestle. I was scared to death to wrestle this boy because he was huge compared to me. Almost immediately, the size of the boy paralyzed me. This was the point my father was trying to make: never be intimidated by anyone, no matter the size of the person. It taught me that it's not the size of the person in the fight, it's the size of the heart in the fighter that determines whether he will be victorious in the end. That was the lesson he wanted me to learn, and I took this lesson on my journey to becoming a dedicated street thug.

Years later when I learned of my father's incarceration from my mama, I just took it in stride. I honestly believe that the time my brothers and I had spent with my father before his incarceration had prepared me mentally to accept his fate. I held no ill feelings towards him because, as I reflect on it, it's like he knew he was destined to be absent from our lives forever and was preparing us for it. Whether his departure was a product of incarceration or getting killed, he made sure to cement his presence in our young minds.

During this period, my mama, two sisters and I moved around quite a bit—but we would always end up back on 2241 Ferry Park. My grandfather owned this house. It was a two family flat, with an empty field next to it that my grandfather owed as well. We stayed in the upper flat. Often, I would go downstairs, sit on the porch and think about what I was going to do for the day. On other days, my friends and I would simply romp in my grandfather's field. Growing up in my grandfather's house was beautiful to me. I felt proud knowing my grandfather owned this house and the land around it. His home represented success and security to me. Again, I knew that even though we lived in many different places throughout our lives, we could always come back to 2241 Ferry Park.

My grandfather's house would be my most permanent address outside of the other addresses that I had during my incarcerations in juvenile homes or prison. (*I have spent a large portion of my life either in police precincts, juvenile facilities, the Wayne County Jail, prison, or on probation or parole.*)

My sister Rachelle and I, between the ages of five and ten, were very close. I remember a time when we were staying at my aunt's house and I got into a fight. I had the boy on the ground and Rachelle jumped on top of me to hit the boy as well. Rachelle was (and still is today) a helluva fighter and she would never let me push her around. To her credit, she won plenty of the fights we had in our youth. But my mama always raised us to be close and to have each other's back, despite having different biological fathers.

My mama married Rachelle's father. She told me it was to get out of my grandmama's house. I don't remember too much about the marriage, or even *when* they got married. From what was told to me, I know he loved putting his hands on my mama more than loving her as a woman. His family was real cool and accepted me even though I wasn't his child. My sister Rachelle looked more like her father with straight Afrikan features. When I was younger, I use to tease her a lot about her features. I would make her feel bad about her kinky hair and dark skin. I had my mama's features of fair skin and so-called "good hair," which was sandy red. Looking back, "Willie Lynch-ism" was alive and well in my house.

The concept of "Willie Lynch-ism" originated to breed a sense of self-hatred among Afrikan slaves. This warped mentality made our people detest everything that was/is Afrikan in us, called phenotype, or how our genes express themselves to make up our physical appearance. Once we were brainwashed by our enslavers, we were trained to hate our dark skins, kinky hair, thick lips, etc. This was used as a mechanism to divide and conquer us more completely. Taken even further, it wasn't just dark skinned Afrikans against light-skinned Afrikans. It devolved into Afrikan men against Afrikan women, Afrikan elders against the young Afrikans, so on and so forth. (Self-hatred has become such a deeply-rooted disease in Black people in Amerikkka that we continue to recycle this mindset generation after generation *within our very own households*, not just in other areas of activity. And we now continue to perpetuate this spirit-killing disease without the help of external forces. Sadly, no prompting, whether overt or covert is needed anymore.)

At the heart of the Willie Lynch concept was to deprive noble Afrikan men and women of their dignity and ability to work together as a collective Afrikan group against their white slave masters. As it is well known, after our Afrikan ancestors were forcefully brought to Amerikkka, they were stripped of their names, religion, culture, heritage, identity, culture, and, most importantly, their *sense of independence*. They were introduced to a slave culture that produced a slave mentality, one that is clearly present in us to this day.

Between the ages of ten and twelve, as we came into our own, my sister and I rarely played together outside of our house, except with our neighbor's daughters. When we went to school, many of the teachers and our friends were unaware that we were brother and sister, because we didn't favor each other and we didn't share the same last name.

Since I was the only boy in my house, I learned how to isolate myself from my sisters. I operated like I was an only child. When my little sister, Julia, was born, I was eight years old and it didn't bother me at all because, tucked away in my subconscious, I knew I wouldn't have to watch her. However, on one occasion, my mama gave me this responsibility. I took her on

one of my adventures and left her up in a tree crying her eyes out. After that traumatic (for her) babysitting experience, I never had to watch her again.

Julia's father was younger than my mama, and I still question to this day what my mama ever saw in him. His name is Dwayne, but everybody called him "Black." He followed the same patterns of abuse as the other men in my mama's life, using her as a punching bag rather than as a woman to caress and love. All I remember of their relationship is fights and more fights. My mama eventually got fed up with his bullshit and left him by relocating us to Highland Park, Michigan. (I was unaware that Highland Park was another city in the state of Michigan. In fact, it is what you call a "bedroom community" of Detroit.) While in Highland Park, my mama bought me my first bike. I was about ten-years-old. At our new house, my sister Julia's cousin, Nate (RIP/Rest in Peace), came over and taught me how to ride it. Nate's mama, Sue, and my mama were real cool, despite the way her brother treated my mama. Sue's younger son, Kelvin, and I would become the best of friends. Every time he needed somebody to help him fight, he would have his mama come and get me. His older brother, Nate, would eventually get killed in a robbery while working at a pawn shop on Dexter in Detroit. Nate's death would have a negative effect on me subconsciously because I was always in search of a big brother, and Nate had always treated me like his little brother. So, when Nate got killed, it was like I had truly lost my big brother. Finally, only a few people knew where we lived in Highland Park, and "Black" wasn't one of them. One time, my grandmama came to visit and "Black" and his partner "Ham" followed her. Right after their visit, my mama moved us back to my grandfather's house.

The rumor is that an old dope dealer who supplied the Young Boys Incorporated took a liking to "Black." He helped him form his own drug business back in the day. My mama never graduated from high school. Instead, she graduated from the streets and would go on to earn her college degree in the "Black Underworld." She became the perfect woman for him to be involved with. Not only could she school him, she had her connections as well. After a few more years of physical and emotional abuse, my mama eventually cut her ties with him completely. The police would eventually catch up with him and he would do a short "bit" in the joint. Shortly after getting out, he fell prey to the new drug of the mid '80s: crack cocaine. I remember one day seeing him in front of our house singing, "We are the base head kids." These days he is doing much better.

I was never bothered by the fact that my sisters and I had different fathers. Actually, it made me more protective of them, and my mama. I was ready to fight at the drop of a hat if someone bothered or said anything bad about them. I was conscious of how people would say slick shit about my mama or look at her funny. To be honest, she never made any apologies about her decisions. My mama took it in stride when she realized she wouldn't be receiving any financial assistance from any of her children's fathers. Her attitude was, "Fuck it, I'ma do what I got to do to provide for my children." She told us all the time that she was both our mama and daddy. And when she said it, she meant it! We didn't always get the name brand stuff that we wanted, but we always had food, shelter and clothing. We never went without those essential things that sustain a family, even if it meant my mama sacrificing her body to provide for us. My mama tried her best to hide from us how she earned her money, but, since I was old enough

to overstand some of the politics of the street life; I kind of knew what was going on. And what I didn't put together, I would hear from different children I played with, who, more than likely, overheard their parents talking about my mama.

When we lived at my grandfather's house, my great uncle Nehemiah lived downstairs. I would run a lot of errands for him to earn a couple of the quarters he always kept on his dresser. I'd usually buy something off of the fruit truck that came to the senior citizen's building across the street from our house. On the days I wasn't waiting on the fruit truck to come, I had a front row seat to watch the prostitutes, pimps, playas, gang bangers, dope sellers, dope users and the whole slew of lumpen proletariat denizens of the neighborhood. In the midst of this deplorable Black ghetto way of living—or, more accurately *surviving*—my mama would find her place. After her broken relationship with my father and subsequent abusive marriage, her mind was made up to embark on life in her twenties with a new outlook. This is when she met a man named “Big Daddy,” and they started dating. He was a part time husband, part time pimp, part time playa and a part time dope seller in a phrase. Thus, he was a full-time hustler. His name and life story sounds like something straight out of one of the Donald Goines books. The stories Donald Goines wrote about, even though fictional, were based on what was real in the Black community, and “Big Daddy” fit right in as one of his characters.

“Big Daddy” lived right next door to us with his wife and eleven children (ten girls and one boy). Throughout our young lives, my sister Rachelle and I played and fought with his younger twin daughters, “Nee-Pooh” (RIP) and Shawnda. We were all aware of our parents' romantic involvement. On the days we got along, we told everybody we were all brothers and sisters. I would lose my virginity to his oldest daughter, “Bird,” as well as learn about oral sex from her sister, “Catta.”

Nevertheless, “Big Daddy” operated the corner store and a gas station on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, as well as other stores throughout the neighborhood. At this time, all the businesses in my neighborhood were Black-owned. Down the street towards Linwood, on the corner of 16<sup>th</sup> Street and Ferry Park, there was one of two small grocery stores owned by the Crocketts. The other was located in the opposite direction, going towards 12<sup>th</sup> Street, on Ferry Park and 14<sup>th</sup> Street. Around the corner there was Mrs. Penny Liquor Store, and next to it was Frank's Barber Shop, the barber shop that my grandfather and I always went to. Then, across the street from my house, there was the legendary White's Record Store. Everybody in the City of Detroit came to White's to purchase their music. Mrs. White was a beautiful woman who served her customers—and the community—well.

The most significant thing about the businesses in our neighborhood was the fact that the owners had their fingers on the pulse of the community. This is because they were an intricate part of it, not just outsiders coming in to suck the (financial) life blood from us. They had a stake in the wellbeing of the people who lived there. As an example, Mr. and Mrs. Crockett knew all the children of the neighborhood because they developed relationships with all the children's

parents. Another example was Mrs. Penny who organized a youth baseball team each year for all the neighborhood boys to give them something positive to do.

Today in my neighborhood, as in most predominately Black neighborhoods throughout this empire, you will be lucky if you find one Black-owned business within a hundred block radius. And, if you do, it barely has enough business to keep its doors open, which is another by-product of “The Willie Lynch Syndrome.” Simply put, we do not support the business ventures of our own people but will support wholeheartedly the efforts, business-related and otherwise, of other races and cultures. At any rate, Mr. and Mrs. Crockett now have one store in my neighborhood—and they are hanging on for dear life to keep it open. It’s both an injustice and tragedy that, nationally, landmark businesses such as theirs have diminished to the point of nearly vanishing in our communities.

I believe my mama and “Big Daddy” had a mutual overstanding between them in that that he provided her with financial assistance and she provided him with something his wife didn’t: having a young, beautiful woman on his arm to represent with him in his “Black Underworld” activities. Many people thought “Big Daddy” was my father because everybody saw him and my mama together while I was so young. Also, he treated me like his son during their relationship—as well as after their relationship had ended.

“Big Daddy” had the dual responsibility of taking care of his own family and helping my mama with her children. (Plus, he had many other women—and *their progeny*—with whom he was involved.) She worked at one of his stores, which was a front for his dope peddling. One day, the store was raided by the Detroit police, and my mama was taken to jail and charged with selling drugs. To be sure, this was/is one of the hazards of that trade. Also during this time, my mama had me stay at one of their friend’s house and, on one my birthdays, she came by and dropped off a garbage bag full of toys. Conversely, these were the spoils of that trade in which she and “Big Daddy” were so heavily involved.

I also remember them sharing an apartment on West Grand Boulevard and the Lodge Expressway (in what is now called the “New Center” area). The apartment would eventually become a safe house for his drug business. One time, “Big Daddy” and my mama were gone somewhere, and my sister Rachele and I were at the apartment with some of their friends. Somebody rang the buzzer. The apartment had one of those security cameras where you could observe who was attempting to enter the building. The man in the apartment with us instructed me, my sister, and another lady to go into the bedroom and hide in the closet. I believed that a drug transaction was about to go down. Come to find out; however, the guy who came up robbed the apartment.

One night at that same apartment, my mama sat in the dark with a shotgun in her hand. When “Big Daddy” entered the apartment, my mama shot him in the stomach. My mama was never charged, and Big Daddy never tried to get even. Though a lot of the men my mama was involved with liked to jump on her, my mama didn’t just sit around and let them hit her. She was a fighter and would fight to the bloody end. Overall, she didn’t take any shit from any of them. To this day I don’t know why my mama shot him, or even what drove her to the point of



entertaining the thought of shooting him. Overstanding that their relationship was an exploitative (and explosive) situation for both of them, it is fair to say that it was headed for destruction. My mama had little formal education. Her ability to make ends meet was based upon her ingenuity and sheer will. She learned early on how to use her looks and her body to take care of herself and her children. Thus, I'm pretty sure that after being messed over by most of the men she had been with, she learned the hard way on how to be with a man without loving him. In her relationships, she never asked a man to do anything for her children, and, following that lead, my sisters and I never asked them for anything as well. Since we weren't the primary reason they were in our mama's life anyway, a relationship between us was never needed to be cultivated.

Years later, besides "Big Daddy," only one of my mama's boyfriends and I ever developed a meaningful relationship. He was a cool guy, and my mama met him through Nate. He also earned points from me because he never put his hands on my mama. We shared the same first name, and his little brother and I became "road-dawgs." While I always wondered why their relationship didn't last, I believe that with all she had been through up to that point, her past relationships just wouldn't allow her to love a man completely. In my opinion the social development of Black men and Black women in Amerikkka is so backwards that the success of developing meaningful relationships between the two is virtually impossible. But I continue to hope for change...

As my mama settled into parenthood; playing dual roles as mama and daddy took a toll on her. She never really had a job during this time but made sure all of the bills were paid. To deal with all the ever-increasing stresses of the day, she would bury her problems by drinking. As her drinking habit worsened, more problems surfaced between us. It was like dealing with two different people, and I hated coming home, or being around her period, when she had been drinking. My grandmama would step in when she could, and that would make a difference only for a little while. I know I gave my mama pure hell—and drove her to some of the bottles she consumed. When she disciplined me, it was mostly after she had been drinking. It felt like she was beating the hell out of me. She would whip me with anything she could get her hands on. Every ass-whipping I got, I absolutely deserved. However, what was missing from our relationship was the nurturing that a parent gives to his/her child. Being a single parent brought a lot of pressure on my mama, especially in raising a boy without any help from a man.

I never really realized the effect my mama's drinking was having on me. All that I truly know is that I was becoming angrier each day. By not having anyone to talk to, this led me to just hold the anger deep inside me. I walked around like a bomb ready to explode. Eventually, my anger would come to a head and show its ugly face in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. A female teacher attempted to discipline me. It erupted into a physical confrontation, and I socked her. This behavioral pattern of rebelling against female authority would be acted out at least three more times in my young life at elementary and middle school. I would realize years later that this aggressive posture against female authority was the results of all the built anger I had towards my mama.