

# Dear Imani: Letters to My Daughter

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DEAR IMANI

LETTERS TO MY DAUGHTER

Antoine Riggins

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## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to every young girl who never met her father or whose father denies her even when he knows the truth.

This book is also for every woman whose child's father left you with no support, for whatever inexcusable reason.

On behalf of these men I speak of, I apologize because I was once one of them, but with time I know better now.

I want you to know there's nothing you can't do in life and everything that you do in life be excellent at it. This is because you're still just as strong, intelligent and worthy, even without them in your life.

My advice to you all is—EXCEL.

Sincerely,

Antoine

aka

THE MAN BEHIND THE WALL, WHERE EVERY DAY IS A LESSON LEARNED

## MESSAGE TO MY ABSENT FATHERS

In our communities, music, television, and the activities within our environment poison our minds into believing it's cool to abandon women once we impregnate them. This is inaccurate.

You can't proclaim to be a man if you consciously abandon your own child, after once being abandoned yourself.

We must change the old ways we were taught to love and create our own and new ways, ways that are more productive. We must display our inner leadership and not become experts at playing follow the leader.

There is so much more to life than what we were taught and see every day we step foot out our door in the hood. We must learn to see for ourselves, and explore new adventures. And we must know for sure, if that baby is ours, never letting another put doubt in our mind. A child is a precious gift, believe me when I tell you. So before you just up and leave that young woman alone to struggle, remember that "Karma" and "Destiny" are women, too.

Be a real man and take care of what's yours.

## WORDS TO MY READERS

I'M NOT PERFECT, nor am I SuperDad, which you will learn as you read this book. What I am though is a growing man, being who I am and not trying to be something I'm not to impress the masses as I used to in the past.

My reasons for writing this short book were many. My main reason though was, after contributing to the problems affecting my community before my incarceration, I've realized it's time to be a solution to the problems I caused.

This book is not just meant for people to hear my story; it was written for other men to see the light that I have seen when it comes to being a man and father. And most importantly to me, to help those women who I feel might not have ended up being abused, misguided and forced into prostitution had their fathers been there for them.

I'm also sharing my story to display how much of a "Dead Beat Dad" I once was to my daughter and how our bond has grown so strong today. Also to demonstrate that being a father is more than a few hugs and kisses. I hope that after reading this book my readers will have been affected in some way, shape or form.

I want to apologize now also, as there may be some things within this book that may offend some of you, but this is me keeping it real and as raw as it gets. I'm tired of trying to be something I'm not to please others; being me is much easier and I'm doing what I love doing now, which is adding to the cause.

Last, if possible, I would like for all who read this book to first listen to a song by J. Cole called "4 Your Eyez Only." I dedicate this song to my daughter, and feel it tells my story in so many ways. I also feel this song brings awareness to the many problems we as young Black men endure in the urban community every day.

With that, enjoy and travel with me a bit through my journey.

Sincerely,

Antoine

aka

THE MAN BEHIND THE WALL, WHERE EVERY DAY IS A LESSON LEARNED

FREEDOM

"Daddy, Where Have You Been?"

- Jay-Z, featuring Beanie Sigel

As of this date, its been eleven years since I have been absent from the one female in my life that I know loves me like no other ever will. That female being my pride and joy and fifteen year old daughter Imani.

I find myself constantly imagining what our lives would have been like had I not been condemned to a lifetime of imprisonment without the possibility of every seeing freedom other than through pictures sent via Postal mail.

Some may ask, "If you feel this way why make a decision that you knew would lead to your absence?" And my reply will always be, "Every occurrence in life isn't the result of a decision, sometimes it's just destiny leading the way of life."

As I continue to evolve into the man I want to become, I learned that sometimes in order to be woken up again in life you have to endure a rough time. As for me, I woke up to see life again in prison. And though my words may sound sometimes spiritual they are not, nor was it the Department of Corrections format that woke me as they have yet to teach me anything. I was awoken when I started to listen, learn and apply the lessons taught to me.

During my journey through life, like many where I'm from, my upbringing wasn't so pleasant due to the extensive amount of adversity I encountered along the way. Though this should not always be an excuse, it can never go overlooked in society today. Now understanding my journey and occasionally reflecting on me and Imani's, I learned that we have something in common, with hers slightly changing. We both grew up with good for nothing fathers. The good thing for her was hers realized that it was time to become a MAN. Mine passed away when I was sixteen years old never realizing nothing. People use to ask, "How did you take his death?" I always reply, "The same as I would any strangers, without emotion." How could I feel any type of emotion about someone I hardly knew?

When Imani entered into this chaotic world, I was a lost sixteen-year-old boy. And at that young age my mind wasn't focused on being a father. It was trapped deep inside the Street Life. Growing up my stranger of a father wasn't around, so I didn't understand the elements of Fatherhood. Most of my knowledge of what a father should be like came from the Streets and our so called profound Justice System where I spent most of my teenage years. And the two had one objective when raising its children and that's to see them all fail in life.

During the first few years of Imani's life, I wasn't as involved as I should have been. At sixteen years old I was the true definition of a "Dead Beat Dad." I still got love for Imani's mother, Clarissa, though we haven't truly spoken in almost two years. And I can't blame her. If any woman endured the pain, heartache and struggles I imposed on her, all you can do is respect her for saying, "Enough is enough." She would have to ask me countless times to buy diapers, clothes, food, milk etc etc before I finally did it. Then, when I decided to quit school and Clarissa didn't, instead of me staying in the house and bonding with Imani, I would leave Imani with a family member while I was in the streets hustling. The streets had so much of a hold on me that on Imani's first birthday instead of celebrating at "Chucky Cheese." I was on a corner selling drugs again.

Today I realize how distorted my priorities were. A part of me decided to change though in 2003, while confined in Glen Mills School for Boys. I was there for violating my juvenile probation, but

being there allowed me to reflect on my past. I believe my increase in thinking was forced due to me feeling alone. I felt alone because I didn't possess the support I usually had while in lock up. I guess my family finally got tired of me not caring about my freedom and life, so they stopped caring as well. Again though, this was just Destiny leading the way of life. While there, I thought about Imani a lot. I thought about all the times I missed out of her life. I missed her birthdays, first steps, first words, and what made her smile and cry. These moments without me there, and the thought of her mother struggling, brought tears to my eyes many nights as I lay in my bed soaking in guilt and pain. It was these depressing nights that made me vow to try to be a better father once I was home.

My first few months home from Glen Mills wasn't what I planned. Still having an itch for the streets, I found myself entertaining a life of no gain. I even found myself locked back up for a car jacking. The only thing that saved me from a five to ten year sentence was because I was in Glen Mills at the time of the car jacking. Sometimes I wish I would have got that sentence, but then I would have missed out on fighting for the best relationship I every fought for.

After proving my innocence and with the help of Imani's mom, I got a job working at McDonalds in South Philly. The same woman I caused so much grief was the reason I wasn't sent back to lock up and responsible for the productive journey I choose to pursue in life. Now all I had to do was make amends with the one for whom it counted. That being, Imani, which wasn't an easy task, but one well worth the stress I endured.

See, when I finally decided to take responsibility at eighteen years of age I believe Imani had it in her mind that I wasn't getting off that easy. In the beginning of us building the bond we share today, Imani would never come to me, as if I was a stranger and in fact, I was. And at three years of age I was known to her as "Hey you" not Dad. And me being the sucker I was for her love, I answered occasionally. My most difficult time of our building our bond was when I would pick her up from her mother's to spend the day or weekend with her. She would cry all the way to my house. Knowing her better than I, Imani's mom advised me to spend more alone time with her so I began taking public transportation with her. Boy did she work me out. With a team effort, Clarissa would get on the bus with us and halfway through the ride would get off and go back home. Once Imani noticed her mom was gone you would have thought I just kidnapped her. And the more I told her to "Be quiet" or "I'm not playing with you" the more she cried as if to say "Or what?" Other hardships she put me through was when we would be on the train and I would tell her our stop was next. Imani would begin crying louder and pull away from me until we missed our stop. She did this twice. I broke the second time when she got up and got off at the next stop, lay on the platform and started crying. I called her mom back to come get us. The commencement of our war began when we was on the bus going from Imani's house to my mom's.

As usual, Clarissa would get on and off the bus and head back to her home. Imani would start her screaming and crying act and me being the get-over-on Dad I was I would pump fake like always, telling her to be quiet and saying "I'm not playing," like I was really going to do something. Noticing my limited Dad skills, the bus driver, who was old enough to be my father, said, "Let her cry, it don't bother me, she'll get tired." He didn't know at this time she was the devil in the flesh. The only other person on the bus was an older Puerto Rican lady. So hearing this and noticing my actions she told Imani, "Come here Ma Ma." Imani stopped crying, got up, laid her little body across the lady's lap, placed her head on her chest facing me, and stuck her tongue out at me. I wanted to fight her. She lay there until we met my mom at our stop, and of course my mom thought it was funny. \*

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This is a true, emotional story of a young man who was sentenced to Life in prison without the possibility of ever seeing freedom again, and losing the opportunity to continue building a robust relationship with his precious daughter.

Travel with him as you read how he was a lost father at the age of sixteen to finally becoming a devoted Father and later a MAN. Hear about the obstacles he faced in order to be a part of his daughter's life again after being absent for almost three years, and the joy it brought before it was all ended by one of his most challenging obstacles encountered yet.

Read how for this young man prison went from being a 'Struggle Every Day' to a 'Lesson Learned,' and how he never gave up on fighting to be part of his daughter's life, even though he was hundreds of miles away.

Enjoy your journey, and learn, experience and feel the same pain along the way in order to understand this growing man's pain. Without further ado, allow me to introduce you all to THE MAN BEHIND THE WALL, WHERE EVERY DAY IS A LESSON LEARNED.

(A portion of the proceeds from the sale of this book will be donated to Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southeastern Pennsylvania, to support programs that help young children excel.)

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