

FAMILY MATTERS

Rashaun Allen

“THE DAY I GRADUATED HIGH SCHOOL NO ONE SHOWED UP.” Mush, Mom’s boyfriend and Mya’s dad, a first-time father in his forties, says this to me one day while we’re lounging in Mom’s living room watching the Knicks lose on his must-have Cablevision. I think, *he grew up in a family without love*. But that idea is squashed when his older brother, younger sister, and her daughter drive from North Carolina to visit us in Brooklyn. Mush’s loud laughs travel from the front of the two-bedroom apartment and go through my shut door. His thick love for family still pulses like a heartbeat.

I can’t say family means the world to me but it’s the only world I know. I’m a high school freshman. And Mom insists I get up on my own. Yet she’s at my door at 6:30 a.m., holding Mya and saying, “Time to get ready for school.”

Mush and I both take the L train. I sort and ration out my name brand clothes. But when Mush heads to work—he moves. He’s already wearing a pressed suit. He offers a tip when he catches me peeking: “You always need at least two. One for a wedding and another for a funeral.” But he must not put a lot of stock in school. The one time we ride together, he says, “The stakes are higher when you work.”

Only a few of us Breukelen project kids attend Norman Thomas High School—a business high school filled with too many NYC public school kids squeezed in classrooms that need more books. But none of them appear on my L to 6 train Manhattan commute. From the entrance, Dominicans rule. Once, either getting off the escalator or in passing, a Dominican classmate who has brown skin like me flips out: “Don’t ever call me black.” But blackness is part of my DNA, like family. What does he get out of denying it?

The second week of classes, we are all called Americans and the nation echoes goodbye to its family members who perish in the twin towers. I am proud and afraid at the same time. Proud of the NYPD who gave their lives to find survivors. And afraid of others who, for the foreseeable future, roam the halls and spread oppression in my school. That one gun, which was found in a

backpack by the metal detector, and the arrest that followed, never outweigh the number of students who go from the classroom to the precinct.

Mom is our family’s sun, and like the earth, our lives revolve around her. She attends a Perfect Opportunity for Individual Skills and Educational Development program at Medgar Evers College. She stirs the household like the food she cooks. Then, she blocks us out to do her homework. Mom’s living a credo she wrote in class: 1) *Trust in the spirit*, 2) *Speak healing words*, 3) *Own your life*, 4) *Cherish your mate*, 5) *Stand tall sister*, 6) *Keep family close*, 7) *Commit to excellent*, 8) *Guard your mind*, 9) *Pass the lessons on*, and 10) *Be good to yourself*.

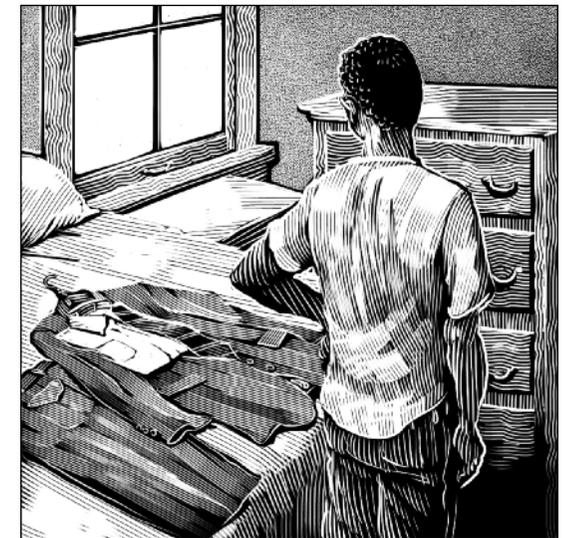
Mom makes us eat at the dinner table. Her plate is untouched. She feeds Mya. Well, tries to. Mya’s food is everywhere: on the high chair and on her face. I eat as if my food will disappear, as if *Phantasy Star Online Version 2* will lose my save point, as if my video-game playing can’t include a break. Mush leaves his plate spotless, but the smell he leaves in the bathroom fills up the hallway.

At this moment, we’re a family.

Like her Dad, Mya’s poop is potent. And changing diapers isn’t in my repertoire. The more she crawls, the higher I elevate my stuff in my room.

There may be a reason for her tears, but there’s no rhyme to her crying. Mom’s class notes read, *“I would like for my son and my daughter to have respect for each other and their parents. To love and understand one another.”*

I can never tell if Mom and Mush are building the same family; sometimes, their actions are out of sync. I hear fragments of Mush’s vision on the couch. “I’m going to marry your Mom” and “We’re moving to a house in Queens” or “Down South.” He’s no longer just a contributor to Mom’s household. I imagine in the future



Tim Foley

he'll say words like "In my house . . ." with bubbling pride. Where I fit in his vision is a guess, but I convince him to buy me a pair of Jordans to march in it.

Once Mush tries to make his version of family a reality. He enters our Breukelen projects apartment with a dozen red roses. If he had planned to get on one knee, the needle-like pain in his leg denies him. But the ring, which he pulls out in the kitchen in front of us all, signifies he intends to marry Mom. She's flustered. Happy. But she's not ready. The engagement is left for another day. Mom accepts the ring only as a promise.

What kind of family does Mom hope for? She didn't get a partner in my father, Jamel. Nor the two-parent household coming up. Mom's homework notes read, "*Memories of my childhood was pretty good. I come from a family of five. I have three sisters and one brother. I'm the youngest. My father raised us and my mother passed away when I was a baby. My father worked hard and supported everyone. He's a retired sanitation man. Everyone was treated the same. Everyone has a good job. All I can say, my childhood was loving and fun.*"

Mom's vision—we may be living it. During the holiday season, none of us but her wants to be at this Sear's department store. Mush's leg is agitating him. Mya keeps crying. And I stroll between the Men and Women sections. But Mom is adamant. She has us looking our best. Mya is in a green dress, Mush wears a button-up, Mom has on a white long-sleeve, and I'm wearing my Rocawear velour suit. When our turn arrives, we pose in front of a Christmas-tree background. The photographer snaps, and Mom turns to us: "This is our family picture."

In our home, Mush can watch Martin Lawrence all night. His laugh is as constant as Mom wants to depend on him. But here and there he's full of surprises: 1) Mary J. Blige tickets 2) a weekend he cleans the whole apartment spotless and 3) he comes home wasted. He can't even stumble into their bedroom. Or maybe Mom won't let him. If I find him snoozing on the couch, it's better than him awake. Words that travel through my shut door from out his mouth, like "Fuck you" and "Bitch," he regrets the next day. Why else would their arguing have me on the verge of snuffing my stepdad? They're breathing heavily in each other's face. Now Mom's Martin-like telling Mush "to get the stepping."

If our family was like the plants around the living room, Mom would continue to add love and we'd blossom. But our family is more a game of spades, and she's figuring out how to deal with this hand. She knows she has a partner

and a great dad. But this good man brought home a handful of bad anger we didn't have before. Who knew getting drunk with the fellas on Glenwood Road could jeopardize a happy home?

In Mom's family, anything, including redemption, is possible. Where others would have reneged on a promise, she scribbles notes on the backside of a sheet of paper. She writes, "*Co-enabling dependency is supporting a substance abuser. Example call in for him covering up excuses. Tough love—make the person know what they did. Example tore up the house don't clean it up so they can know they have a problem.*" On the other side, she circles Drug and Alcohol Abuse for Wednesday, October 31, 9:00 a.m., Facilitated by the Association for Drug Abuse Prevention and Treatment.

IT'S DECEMBER. MOM KNOCKS ON MY DOOR to brief me about her day. "I'm taking Mya to her doctor's appointment. I should be back by the time you get home from school."

I nod. Get dressed. She's boiling ziti for tonight's dinner while I wolf down a bowl of Frosted Flakes. Nothing is washed. She needs help, the harshness of the world is wearing on her psyche. Any WIC received, Tupperware-made or Mush-given money is spent on bills, Mya, and me. Neither her hair nor nails are getting done like she's used to. She has the garbage waiting for me by the door. Then she kisses me goodbye and locks the door behind me.

At school, I prep for or take a test that will impact holiday report card grades. I wonder if Mom will say "Don't clog up the phone line" when I get home. If so, I'll sneak and dial up AOL to play *Phantasy Star Online Version 2* anyway.

I return home and two white men are in front of my apartment door. Questions fill my head. *Do I fit the description? Or am I under arrest?* Any spoken word will sound sideways. They're detectives. And they find me—a fourteen-year-old black boy. But they don't say any more details than, "There's been an accident."

A Nissan rear-ended a van that spun out of control. Two days later, December 13, 2001, "Crash Kills Mother Walking Across Street," reads the *Canarsie Courier's* headline. The font is plastered over a photo of Mya's crumpled stroller and Mom's Pathmark groceries all over the pavement.

My reality disappears. And the suit I get isn't for a wedding. I don't know what to do, don't know what I will do. And I don't want to hear, "She's with God."

I reimagine a conversation we had. Mom enters my room, “How would you feel about having a sister?” I pause the Playstation and nonchalantly say, “Fine as long as everything stays the same.” But life is never the same again.

Mya is a maybe. Maybe she’ll live. Maybe she won’t.

Mush and I never talk about life after Mom’s death. Now that his lover’s gone, will his stepfather role still be valid? Will Mya have her big brother in her life? What will her relationship with our Mom’s family look like? Unless I count when he says, “You can live with me,” and then my keys to Mom’s apartment door stop working.

Mush’s world has folded in on itself. Mom can never be his wife. I carve my world out, move everything that reminds me of Mom to Granddad’s apartment.

I choose to live a block away with Granddad ’cause he’s what a father is to me. All he says: “You can stay with me.” And I never worry about three things: food, shelter, and clothes.

In Granddad’s home, I miss homecooked meals: curry chicken, macaroni and cheese, baked ziti. What Granddad cooks is nasty, and the alternative, fast food all the time, loses its allure. I miss what was my family: Mom, Mya, and Mush. And I miss never knowing how the fragments of our lives would’ve redefined family.

I am fourteen, shocked into a more adult version of myself.

Mom’s rules no longer apply and even the streetlights turning on cue she’s gone. I go to school. Wouldn’t Mom want that? But my own dream is buried in misery. There never was a future Mom wasn’t in, and now reality says that’s a lie. Why can’t the constant dreams of Mom be real? I crave my life back to when the worst part was Mom not letting me dial up online.

So much is no longer possible. Mom will never be married. She will never be a Grandma. She will never know her future self. She will never meet my future self, wife, or kids. Call me foolish, I want the innocence of not knowing death so intimately.

GRANDDAD’S THREE-BEDROOM APARTMENT BECOMES MY HOME. The hurt leaves me empty like the spare room. But I wonder if the hurt ever retreats. The hurt needles my heart forever. Granddad hears. He comes into my room and sits at the edge of the bed. My eyes barely see tears drop from his.

I go to school. I go see Mya. I go to school. I go see Mya. I can’t concentrate. I can’t stand to see Mya filled with tubes.

Our family picture is in my wallet. Any moment my mind is idle, I stare at it. In the middle of class, waiting for the train, and now on the B60 bus on the way to visit Mya. It doesn’t help clear my thinking. If only I had been a better son. I would have taken out the garbage and washed the dishes within minutes of being asked. Mom would still be here.

My stop arrives. No, wait. A girl is eyeing me on the bus today. And all the signs—her staring and smiling—shows she’s interested. But I only exit the bus.

Brookdale hospital is a block away. When I walk in, the guard has seen my face since the car accident and waves me ahead. No, the guard is barely paying attention and I pay him no mind. But I am counting the days, now weeks, since I’ve been able to press the adolescent floor and not the intensive care floor on the elevator buttons.

“Where’s Mya?” I say to a nurse.

“Oh she’s in the playroom.” Her Caribbean accent carries her words. “You’d never guess she came here a month and a half ago in critical condition.”

Her recovery is a miracle. She’s a normal baby who loves to play. She doesn’t know the fight for her life she had in intensive care.

“Shaun, Shaun,” Mya says running to me in a walker. Her hair is braided and long. She’s a couple inches taller. She hugs me then pulls me to join her and other children in a game. Noise rattling. I’m in awe. I think, I could get used to hearing her speak. I snap pictures of her. “Your sister is healthy enough to go home,” says the Caribbean nurse. But where Mya will call home—somewhere with her Dad or with an aunt of ours—is a troubling mystery.

Mya lives with Mush in what was Mom’s apartment. But when she stays over at Granddad’s apartment—she’s a ball of life. She has Granddad, a seventy-three-year-old retired man, moving like he’s ten years younger. She hurries then runs with Aunt Grace or Aunt Vicki to the Stanley Avenue bodega.

When Mya and I go out, we hang in the park. “Swing,” she shouts. Then she pulls my hand to the slide. She’s full throttle until I stop. “Mya, I’m tired.”

Back in Granddad’s apartment, Mya’s in the kitchen refusing his cooking. Buck, a friend who lives across the parking lot from Granddad’s, knocks at the door and by the time I answer, she’s in between us refusing to let me leave.

Granddad pulls American cheese out of the fridge and offers her a slice in the middle of the hallway. She's chewing with a smile. And I sneak outside.

A year or two later, Mush and Mya move forward with his family vision into a house in North Carolina. Will I see Mya again? I can't bring Mya back to Brooklyn nor Mom back to life. I am an outsider to that family. But our family picture is still in my wallet.