[Snap Judgment]

[somber music]

**Glynn:** My mother was 24 years old when she had me. Her firstborn child, which while not at all strange, it seems to me now impossibly young. Most of my own time when I was 24, I squandered in random bars and random cities. Instead, she told me that she prayed for a baby boy. When she was given one, she fed me, birthed me, bathe me, kissed me, sang to me, and read me and all the beautiful things that mothers do, before I burden, before this wall of misunderstanding and the [unintelligible 00:00:56] that poisons our relationship had even taken root. Because I was first, for one full year, I did not have to share her. I basked in her full and undivided attention. Her eyes were the first thing I saw in the morning and the last thing I stared into before she bundled me into a blanket at night.

I was not an exceptional child. My first words did not erupt early. My first steps occurred far outside the statistical average. A birthmark stained the side of my face. There was even talk from outside our house that maybe I wasn't quite right. But she treated me as if I was a special gift from God. She thought I was. So young herself, so dutiful, as if nothing in all the world could possibly be more important than me. Why? Colicky, feverish, slow, spotted, what is this impulse to sacrifice her own youth for mine?

Today, on Snap Judgment, a love letter sorts to the woman who first taught me what the word 'love' even means. Snap Judgment proudly presents Mama Knows Best. My name is Glynn Washington. And there will be no content advisories on today's show because mama does not appreciate that kind of language when you're listening Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

Now, we begin with a story called My Mother Made Me. It's a series from Radiotopia Presents. Writer, Jason Reynolds, and his mother Isabell, they explore a shared history on what happens when the child is no longer a child. I'll let Jason take it from here. Snap Judgment.

**Jason:** I was raised by a fascinating woman.

My mom was raised by two farmers, basically, a farmer and a farmer's wife. When I came around, it was kind of like, "Imma give this boy everything I got and everything I didn't have to make sure that he grows up as a whole person."

I think about the things my mother taught us as kids about-- even if it was an ancient belief system that she had no problem saying, "It doesn't make sense, so we don't have to believe that."

No matter what else is going on, you make sure that your clothes aren't wrinkly and your shoes are clean. It was the big deal for her. [crosstalk]

Your mom is complete badass. I mean, "God."

Oh, yeah. All the way.

Yeah, she's definitely a G and pretty much the star this podcast and you're going to hear from her soon. But first think of me as her warm-up act. Let me tell you the story to get you primed for the Isabell Reynolds' experience.

A few years ago, I was on tour promoting a book I'd written called *Look Both Ways*, which is a collection of short stories exploring the moments young people get to become more of themselves without the watchful eye and wisdom of adults. I'd been on tons of book tours, trekking across the country, from the smallest towns to the biggest cities. And usually when I showed up, I'd be given a lovely introduction, and then I'd basically stand at a microphone and talk for 45 minutes about the book, the making of it. Maybe I'd even read a little from it and crack some jokes. It was a strange routine. A one-man show. Performance art that ended with Q&A, and an autograph line with some of the most adorable children on the planet. Kids who showed up ready to take pictures and tell me all their thoughts about my stories, which usually blurred into thoughts about this. It's an incredible experience for me. But over the years, it's become difficult to lift it all by myself.

So, some time ago, I asked my publicist if I could do my tour in conversation, which just means every stop someone would interview me about my work in front of an audience. And though it lacks some of the oomph that usually comes with my, let's call them performances, if the person sitting across from me is the right person, the experience can still be pretty entertaining.

Look, I got my wish list. I mean, I'd love to chat with Terry Gross or Don Cheadle, I don't know, Patti LaBelle, Angela Bassett, or somebody like Jonathan Majors, I feel like he'd be a good interviewer. Or maybe one of my uncle's, like my Uncle Bob, who would only ask questions that would make me laugh. And we'd probably split a bottle of wine on stage and make a mess of things. Or maybe Jay Z. But like I said, I got my wish list. But one person who I was fortunate enough to be interviewed by on the *Look Both Ways* tour is to me more legendary than everyone else I just named. Well, except for maybe Uncle Bob. I mean, this person is a cultural cornerstone, a legend's legend, a generational giant. And on top of all of that, he used to rock a mean hoop earring. I'm talking about the incomparable LeVar Burton.

Yes, that LeVar Burton, from *Reading Rainbow* and *Roots* and *Star Trek*, and should have been *Jeopardy* but we don't have to talk about that. It was a beautiful day in LA and when I showed up at Barnes & Nobles at the Grove, LeVar was waiting in the greenroom, which was actually the staff's break room because bookstores don't be glamorous. We introduce ourselves and chat briefly for a few moments before taking the stage. The first 10 minutes of the interview, we ended up talking about our mothers. We spoke their names and waxed about how grateful we are for them, to have come through them, to have been of them. We even cried a little. And that was the beginning of the show. And I wish I could tell you that moment was the highlight, but it wasn't. The most memorable moment, for me at least, came after we finished signing books.

**LeVar:** Our first moment of bonding was over our moms, around our moms.

**Jason:** Yeah, I reached out to LeVar to ask him if he remembers that conversation.

**LeVar:** But as I recall, we spent some time that day also-- I prompted you, "Are you taking care of yourself?" Right?

**Jason:** Right.

**LeVar:** And you sort of hemmed and hawed and I got [laughs] a very clear sense that this was an issue for you in your life, that this was something that you were struggling with. And I just wanted to as someone who has had experience having to learn the need and necessity, painfully, painstakingly learned the need and necessity to prioritize my own health and as someone who recognizes you, Jason, I see you, brother. I want you to be able to operate at your optimal capacity.

**Jason:** Man, I appreciate it.

**LeVar:** Self-care is a huge part of that. And I got the sense [laughs] that your mother agrees with me.

[laughter]

**Jason:** She definitely does.

Now that you're all warmed up, let's talk about my mom.

[somber music]

Most Sundays, I pull up to my mother's house with a coffee and the New York Times. I stop in the middle of the driveway to grab the Washington Post she has delivered every week. Then, I ring the doorbell. I've got a key, but I never use it, mainly because I love the look of excitement on her face when she opens the door, even though she's always expecting me. Other than holiday decor and on this Sunday, my mother had broken out the browns, oranges, and yellows for the upcoming Thanksgiving dinner, this house ain't changed in years. From the green carpet to the tchotchkes and old knickknacks that pepper the coffee table, to the gallery wall of random art, including a framed Washington Post profile on me from years ago, as moms do, to the strange assortment of clocks scattered around the living room, dining room, and kitchen, all of which are set to different times. Some 10 minutes fast, others 6 minutes slow.

The radio was always on in the kitchen unless the television is on. And on Sundays, it's the TV, which is strange, because my mother don't never sit in the kitchen on Sunday. She sits in the office where there's also a TV.

[TV running in background]

**Jason:** They all look good, don’t they?

**Isabell:** Who is it?

**Jason:** That was Deanna [unintelligible [00:10:45]. There she go.

Now on Sunday, she makes what has to be a half a liter of instant coffee, which is why I bring my own and holes up in her office, which used to be my older brother's room, and watches the news all day long.

There's more.

**Isabell:** I want to take a--

**Jason:** Except--

**Isabell:** Come on, love, I want to take a selfie.

**Jason:** --For when I come home.

Please send me a selfie. I would love to get a selfie from you every now and then. Your beautiful face.

**Isabell:** Okay, now for me to take a selfie, what do I do? Hit this?

**Jason:** Mm-hmm. That means turning the camera around to face you, so hit that button. Boom.

I'd say at least a third of my role as son is comprised to be fixing my mother's printer, or teaching her how to use her latest piece of technology. The computer, a new television, and of course, her cell phone.

See, that's the one I took.

**Isabell:** That is great.

**Jason:** [laughs] Yeah, but you know.

**Isabell:** That’s a really good picture of you. You took that of you.

**Jason:** Mm-hmm.

[somber music]

**Jason:** These Sundays are important to me because in some ways they serve as my church. As someone who's not the most religious man, there's some kind of altar for me to kneel, and that also happens to be at this home where we're sitting right now. The home of the great Isabell Reynolds, which also happens to be the home I grew up in. It's where I cut my teeth, lost my teeth and grew new teeth. It's where she taught me to eat the world.

**Isabell:** So, what’s new, babe?

**Jason:** It's been a rough week.

**Isabell:** In what way?

**Jason:** Furthermore, it's where I come to lay my burdens down.

I don’t know. There's a lot going on. Every now and then, I have those times where I'm just like overwhelmed. Every day, every week, you sort of wake up, you can start your week, you put everything where it needs to be in your mind about all the things you have to do, all the people you have to do it for, all the work you have to do. I mean you know this, you've done it your whole life.

**Isabell:** Yeah.

**Jason:** And then, sometimes you just want to scream.

**Isabell:** Yeah.

**Jason:** But I don't scream. At least, I try not to. However, I feel whatever the weight of a scream is in my body. And I've been thinking a lot lately about where a person puts that weight. I mean, life is a lot of things. Maybe it's more accurate to just say life is a lot. I guess it's this way for everyone. But I know it's this way for me. Don't get me wrong, there's so much laughter There's so much joy. But there are just as many moments where I feel so much pressure. The skin on my face feels stretched from the tension of tears, almost to the point of splitting some imaginary seam that runs from widow's peak to goatee. Days where one moment I'm basking in the weird affirmations of my life, that I've somehow made something of it and I feel so useful to the world. And then shortly after, I feel-- well, I feel used by the world, completely depleted after giving whatever I have to whoever needs it.

You know, and this was one of those weeks where I was kind of like, because there's never a time where anyone who needs something from me says, "Maybe I won't ask. Maybe I won't ask him to do this." Except for you.

[laughter]

[somber music]

You're the one I want to ask. You're the one I'm saying, "Ask me."

But don't nobody want to hear that. Nobody want to hear me crying about how living my dream should come with some kind of instruction booklet or at least a warning label. And the only way to deal with it is to play perspective games, to force feed myself emotional illusions, "But I wouldn't trade it for the world," or "It's better than what I used to be doing," or "Be grateful."

Talking to the strangers in the industry, it's like, "We need an interview, we need this, we need that, we need this, we need that, we need this thing, and that thing, this thing and that." And it's like, "How? How am I supposed to do all of this and maintain some sense of mental health, get rest, take care of, like how--?

The truth is I wouldn't trade my life for anything. And it is better than what I used to do, and I am grateful. But I'm also human. Sure, I've seen and done things my family and many of my friends could have only dreamt of, but I don't mean there's not a heavy cost. So, when what feels like the collective boot is upon my back, I always ask myself, "Where exactly am I supposed to put the weight?" And then just in time, Sunday comes.

What am I supposed to do?

**Isabell:** Well, as far as I've read, it's not what happens. It's how do you react to what's happening. You can get all flustered and upset, blah, blah, blah, or you can just take it in stride. And one thing for sure, it will work itself out. Always does. And when you take your time, it works out to your benefit.

**Jason:** Mm-hmm.

**Isabell:** It does. It really does. But you're so much like your mother in more ways than you even realize. You may look like your daddy, but I accept that, I got no choice. But you know what, Jays? Motivational people, people who are driven are basically that way.

**Jason:** The irony is not lost on me that this is coming from a lady who struggles to take a selfie, but clearly don't struggle to see herself.

You made me like this. What do you think made you like this?

**Isabell:** I think it's just part of my makeup, son.

**Jason:** And I kind of feel like it's part of mine. Something in me that pushes me because I can do anything. And by the way, I can do anything. You know how I know? Because my mother told me so. Matter of fact, my mother made me tell myself so every night as a child. She made me say it loud enough for her to hear after I recited my nightly prayers. It didn't matter how tired I was. It didn't matter if I was upset or annoyed or if we weren't getting along or even if I was sick. I had to say it aloud every single night in the same house. The TV playing in the kitchen loud enough for me to hear, but never loud enough to distract me from those four words. My nonnegotiable mantra. "I can do anything."

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Oh, we're just getting started. More family drama when our story continues. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Mama Knows Best episode where writer, Jason Reynolds, was giving us a guided tour of his most important relationship. Snap Judgment.

[somber music]

**Jason:** Let's get back to my mom. Let me tell you more about this amazing person. If I had to sum up her personality in a single word, well, first of all, I wouldn't want to, but if I had to, it would be 'driven'. She worked in insurance and her office was an hour away from where we live, so she had to be out the house by 6:00 AM to avoid traffic. She started working for this company when she was a 16-year-old, clawing her way up from the mailroom to the executive office. The only black woman, the only black person, period, in that position. Driven. She was driven as a mom, doing her best to make sure my brother and I had everything we needed. Food on the table every night, staying up to check our homework, and taking us to practices and games, even though she had to be up early to take that long journey to the office. She was driven to be the best family member. Wife, daughter, sister, auntie. Doing her best to give everything she had.

On the weekends, when she should have been resting, she'd be micromanaging our chores. My main chore was to dust which, let me tell you it was tough because our house was like a bazaar, full of things that seemed like they were supposed to be dusty. Today, she's still that person. An "I can do anything" kind of person, at least to me. Still spreading herself thin trying to be everything to everybody. Only difference is, well, I ain't got to dust no more. Thank God.

I [unintelligible 00:20:49] a house full of things, ma. I can work with you. There are things everywhere in this house. Old things. Everything's got a story. That's what I value. My fear is that I'll wake up with all of these beautiful stories around me and I won't have one of my own. That's my fear, because so much of my life has been just work, work, work, work, work, work, work. And I don't know if I'm living fully right now.

**Isabell:** To me, you live well.

**Jason:** My lifestyle is a good lifestyle.

**Isabell:** Yeah, it is.

**Jason:** But am I living my life is what I'm saying.

**Isabell:** I gotcha.

**Jason:** Let me ask you this. What do you think makes you feel joy? Because that's what I'm trying to figure out.

**Isabell:** I think the main thing, Jays, when it boils down to that makes me feel good is to feel needed. More needed than wanted.

**Jason:** More needed than wanted. I get that. I really, freely do. It's like I said, there's nothing better than the moments I feel useful to the world. It almost makes me wonder if service is addictive, a drug that causes some kind of strange endorphin rush. Or if service has become a crutch I use to prop up some insecurity I'm unaware of. Or maybe if it's a sexy way to hide my workaholism. And what if workaholism is genetic? I mean, I know it's not, at least I don't think it is. But what if?

I think this is a good thing that you've given me. But I think that it could be-- I have to figure out how to harness it the right way. I think it's taken you a long time to figure that out. And I think it has done great things for your life, especially the lives of the people around you are benefited from it, but I also think it's caused you tremendous-

**Isabell:** Grief?

**Jason:** Grief.

Grief [sighs] in so many forms, like sleepless nights or a drink too many, or cancer. Growing up, I watched my mother serve as a pillar holding up far too much. Our family, immediate and extended. The company she worked for. All her friendships. She'd become more of a what than a who, machine. Perhaps like a vending machine. I know this sounds harsh, but it's true that we all just took from her, and we took from her and took from her without ever depositing anything, just knocking against her and taking whatever she had to offer, only to look on in awe at her refusal to break down.

**Isabell:** It didn't take me long to figure it out, babe. I figured it out a long time ago. I just wouldn't do it. I thought I was more of a coward to do it. I couldn't say no, I didn't want to say no. I suppose the family members were expecting me to do X, Y and Z, and I felt within myself I'm not going to let them down.

**Jason:** So, I did and still do exactly what I was taught. I'd do anything. If I want to do it, nothing tells me I can't. If I'd never done it, well, I ain't afraid to try. And if I don't know how, I'm willing to learn. But sometimes the weight of anything gets heavy because it's not always about the things I want to do. Sometimes, it's about the things I don't want or need to do. But I'm so used to doing it all, whatever it takes to not just make my dreams come true but to sustain them, while also figuring out how to quell the nightmares of my kith and kin if possible. And to me, everything is possible. Everything. But it don't always feel that way.

**Isabell:** So, what are you going to do?

**Jason:** I don’t know. Try to figure it out and trying to give myself permission to just not do what I can't do. Can't do everything.

**Isabell:** No, you can't.

**Jason:** Maybe some things I just have to be okay with, "You know what? Can't do it. Not right now. Maybe not ever." Just can't do it, you know?

**Isabell:** It's that you just don't want to disappoint nobody.

**Jason:** Yeah.

**Isabell:** And that's okay too. You don’t know what life brings, it's-- Mm-hmm. And it's important to live each day for what makes you happy.

[somber music]

**Jason:** What makes me happy? Learning about the world, and laughing with kids and eating a delicious meal, and of course, catching up with my mom on Sundays. But always Sunday mornings, because by the time evening comes, her eyes are heavy, and that old office chair becomes a mattress if mattresses came in right angles. I also come early so I can get out of here around noon. That way, I get the rest of my day, my fun day to work. What can I say? My mother made me.

This podcast was supposed to be a tribute to my mom, honoring her voice she's taught me, how to always remember where I'm from, or how to look to a higher power or how life, it's about service, gems to get me to a place she'd never seen. But I realized in talking to her that now that I'm here, maybe I have to take those rules, the commandments of Isabell Reynolds, and tweak them just a little to fit who I am today so I can really live this thing. And maybe that's what this podcast is really about, where she and I are teaching each other. And how perhaps we both could use some lessons on taking selfies, so to speak. So, yeah, I can do anything. Even start a podcast about my mother, and all she's taught me but now, it seems like I'm learning that just because I can do anything, don't mean I always have to.

**Isabell:** And if you find time, I know you're busy, and I have no right to ask this but your schedule is so heavy.

**Jason:** But you're going to ask it anyway.

**Isabell:** Yeah.

**Jason:** See what I'm saying? This is what happens.

**Isabell:** [laughs]

**Jason:** We just talked about this.

[laughter]

**Jason:** Go ahead. Ask what you want to ask.

And if all else fails, I'll just change this to an interview podcast, or a podcast on new wonders of the world. Or maybe technology or home improvement or interior design or floral arrangements. Or self-care, healthcare, welfare, a podcast on the changing definitions of everyday words. So, regional slang, a podcast in the history of fashion and how loose is in again. A podcast on just the color 'red' or just wooden buttons or which eyeglasses are best for a heart-shaped face.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** Thank you so much to Jason, his mother, Isabell, and our friends over at Radiotopia Presents for sharing the story with us. My Mother Made Me is a production of Radiotopia Presents. It's written and narrated by Jason Reynolds with his mother, Isabell Reynolds. The series is produced by Mark Pagán and edited by Julie Shapiro, with production support from Yooree Losordo. Julie Shapiro and Audrey Mardavich are executive producers for Radiotopia Presents. Special thanks to Levar Burton. We are so thrilled to finally get you on this show. Mixing, sound design, and additional original music is by Ian Coss. This episode was recorded at Snap Power Station, WAMU. We'll have links to all things Radiotopia at *snapjudgment.org.*

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*