

Cassandra Saxton

Black Woman on Fire

Dear Daughter,

Somewhere in the back of my drawers, and under my bed, and on the top shelves in my closet are dozens of yellowed notebooks filled with all the things I wish to tell you. All those unfinished letters begin the same— “I have loved you decades before you were born, and it has always been my intention that you live well.” I’ve always seen your face running through my dreams, ever since I was a little girl. Your cinnamon skin and bright eyes, like obsidian; curly “pineapple” hairdo, with features so close to mine, but not quite. Now, when I look at your face in my dreams, I see the past and future. The light in your eyes reflects a joyful innocence that has dimmed in all the black women before you; your easy smile remains unmutated by racism and sexism—dual weapons aimed at us. But do not be afraid of this world’s viciousness. My past and present do not have to be your future. Every action I and your foremothers take to move this country away from the shackles of prejudice is for your protection and the happiness of the generations after you.

Two summers ago, I protested the brutal murder of George Floyd by police. Ignoring the COVID-19 guidelines, warning against being within six feet of another, I marched down New Haven’s narrow streets, squished between thousands of people. With every step, I recalled how many seconds Derek Chauvin knelt on Floyd’s neck before his heart stopped—569. The righteous fury with which every

protester burned that day lasted for as long as I was on the front lines. But once home, beneath my mask of bravery, was a cold, sinking, familiar terror so visceral it shocked my conscious to its core. I wondered which one of my family members would be next. My father, out for a walk? My brother, pulled over at a traffic stop? My children, playing at the park? I marched in fear for their futures, and in memorial of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown; Breonna Taylor and Sandra Bland; both Emmitt Till and George Stinney, who were fourteen, and Tamir Rice, who was twelve. I marched for those whose rights were violated and bodies destroyed. But the whole time I wondered how long I must offer my body as kindling to keep these movements going.

I realize black women are no stranger to tiredness. Our ancestral mothers were tired of their babies being ripped from their bosom to be sold to slaughter. Harriet Tubman was tired when she led groups of runaway slaves to freedom through the night. Ida B. Wells was tired when she reflected on the savagery of lynching. Rosa Parks was tired when she decided not to give up her seat for a white man. Shirley Chisholm was tired when she campaigned for the 1972 presidential election amidst public scrutiny of her race and sex. I was especially tired when, not long after I protested, a group of black boys screamed insults at me for wearing my natural hair out.

This country and its people have committed grievous sins against the black woman, for which they have neither acknowledged nor remedied. Although black women have been on the front lines of every anti-racism movement, who, besides

other black women, has sparked a movement around our struggles? As a future lawyer, I intend to use the power of the clause and comma to take up the mantle for our causes, if not for my sake, for yours. For there are many fires to put out but not enough activists in position to begin the process. Through the actions of dedicated advocates at every level, I hope my prayers for your life come true.

I pray that when I give birth to you, the doctors will not ignore my pain or signs of complications, as they did to Serena Williams. I pray that I won't add to the statistic that says black women are three times more likely to die in childbirth than any other race in America, as Serena Williams almost did. I pray that after you are born, people will not assume I am "the help," rather than your mother, as they did to my mother. As you grow up, I pray no one claims you're "acting white" if you speak well or "ghetto" if you're loud and use slang. I pray you love the big lips, nose, and hair your ancestors gave you, and that you take pride in your identities. Above all, I pray that you live well, as intended by all the women before you.

All my best,

Mom