

INTRODUCTION

*To my beloved children
and grandchildren,*

After much thought, I have decided that a letter might best acquaint you with the times that I am living in. Textbooks have done enough damage to the truth, and a novel can often find itself mixing fact with fiction – much like the news channels of today. But a letter is the product of my heart being given a pen. Of course, my heart has become calloused – perhaps too much a product of what it has been subjected to. But its posture is an honest reaction to what life has apportioned to me. If I can promise anything, it is an honest reflection of what it has meant to exist in the twenty-first century – as a black person in a world that celebrates black suppression. As a black man in a world that seems to crave black men’s blood. As a black person who is certain that compassion is the only

EVERYONE VERSUS RACISM

solution to the deadly tale of racism. I am not saying that we should forgive and forget. But I believe that in our fight to move forward, we must arm ourselves with as much empathy as we do energy. I think that the only thing left that can save humanity is a touch more humanity from both sides. Many people will disagree with this position, and I do not blame them. After watching the video of George Floyd's murder, I, too, was filled with anger. In fact, sometimes the aching parts of me still are. Unfortunately, however, I've lived to see how consuming vengeance can become once empowered. I've worked in the martial arts my whole life and I know what can happen when rage justifies itself before searching for a peaceful solution. I've wished the revolutionary well on their way into a life of such activism. I know we need them. I know we cannot all be them. I desire to laugh truthfully, from the floor of my gut, with my radiant grandchildren, and fill their bodies with love and hope rather than anger and resentment.

Sometimes this means closing my heart when rage comes knocking. Shielding my young family from the structures that may one day work against them. Sometimes it means turning off the news, forcing my head deep into the waters of joy and trying to fish out a level of compassion and humanity that I wish was extended to me. Deep in the anatomy of the black being, there is a resource so

INTRODUCTION

rare in the fallen world. Something that has perhaps had to be conditioned into us so we can survive. Hope. A grieving, electric hope for a more balanced tomorrow.

I have decided to write a letter because, since the beginning of time, letters have preserved the truth of the moment, even if that truth has changed by the time the ink dries. If all this shard of my heart does is to project the current state of affairs beyond our WhatsApp group chats and kitchen tables, it has played its part in commemorating a season of life that I hope changes the world. Goethe, an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writer, referred to a letter as an ‘immediate breath of life’. Today, the streets scream ‘I can’t breathe’ into a mourning sky, repeating the last words from several black men who have been brutally killed at the hands of the police. We hold signs, take to the streets and pull fire from our throats. We eternalise the last words of these men by forcing them into the everlasting journey of the wind, in the hope that we keep breathing long enough to see our grandchildren scream only in laughter, and not in protest.

Perhaps you will stumble across this manuscript years from today, during a time when letter writing no longer serves as a form of documentation. Maybe your fingertips will pause on the spine of this book and you will tug on its skin till it slips from its shelf into curious palms. You might push the dust away with your breath, rotate it

EVERYONE VERSUS RACISM

between your fingers and begin to digest the blurb on the back cover. And as you get to the last line, you might wonder whether the year 2020 was fiction or non-fiction. As I piece together this letter, I wonder the same. Living, or at least surviving, has begun to feel like an existential satire. In an attempt to convince my body that it is not an actor in *The Truman Show*, I write obsessively about the times, hoping to make sense of the pandemic we have found ourselves in. No, not COVID-19. A much older disease. Racism.

I have worn black skin for centuries. And over these years my flesh has been weaponised, regulated, discriminated against, bleached, incinerated, sold and yet, somehow, I have survived. Somehow, I smile. But you won't remember me from my smile. You will remember me from a photograph that forced a large percentage of the watching world to pause. To stop thinking for long enough to question their thoughts. To question their bias and decide how they felt towards a six-foot-one black man lifting a barely breathing white man from beneath blood-stained shoes and carrying him to the feet of police officers who picked their other, arguably less essential job of documenting the violence for evidential purposes (as opposed to stopping the incident) on their selfie sticks and smartphones. Depending on which side of favour you fall, the

INTRODUCTION

thought of a police officer not doing their duty to defuse the violence and protect the violated may seem appalling, if not felonious, during a moment such as this. But by 2020, this hardly came as a surprise to me, a black man. A black man who believes that if life and death cannot discriminate, then nor can we begin to play master over who deserves to live or die. On that Saturday, near Waterloo Station, when I saw a man's breath being robbed from him by righteous rage, I saw only a man. One whose death would scatter a family, but also tarnish the Black Lives Matter movement in a way that I knew we could not afford. Not after such a global display of peaceful, progressive momentum.

The centuries have shown this compassionate position to be held time and time again, almost exclusively by the victims of those who kill to hone their omnipotence. Perhaps, as black people, we have no choice but to be graceful. To suppress our anger and pray that in our peace, we can remind the world of our shared humanity – even though, like animals, we are still hunted and killed for our skin, despite our imposed demureness.

Across my TV screen in the weeks leading up to this particular protest, I and the rest of the world watched graphic videos of the police killing innocent black people. We saw how our worth was valued. We waited for verdicts on indictments or arrests that never came. We watched

EVERYONE VERSUS RACISM

children's innocence become a life of protest during the short time it took for a policeman to suffocate someone's daddy.

We watched the worry grow on our own mothers' faces as history continued to hurt. We wondered why, for centuries, white people felt entitled to our very breath. The wonder mobilised and we took to the streets to convince everything under the global sky that black lives mattered just as much as any other. But the unambiguous objectivity of a united quest towards equality sent a shiver down racist spines.

*When you've held power for so long, equality will
look like oppression.*

An anti-Black Lives Matter protest was announced by the English Defence League co-founder Tommy Robinson (who we will talk about a bit later) in the middle of the biggest global movement towards equality. A spear was fired into the black body, in the hope that it would stop the world from running into a better tomorrow. To be anti-Black Lives Matter is not only to suggest that black people do not deserve equality. When the catalyst to this protest was a pandemic of black men being unfairly slaughtered, to contest the movement is to support the legalising of black murder. And in the hundreds of white

INTRODUCTION

people who came out that weekend to reveal the true tarnished nature of their racist hearts, we saw Britain. Together they chanted racist chants as they marched the streets of London, stomping on the tender hearts that had lined the roads and stripping England of its progressive facade. In doing so, the Western world was reminded that not only is there so much work to do, there is also an equal amount of discriminatory work to un-do.

That Saturday, fathers told their children to stay home. These dads, like myself, had lived through senseless white rage before and knew how aggressive it could be. Mums forbade their daughters from attending the original protest planned for that day because they, too, knew what angry, empowered racist men were capable of. But us? We knew we had to be there. If not to protect the momentum of these protests, then to protect our black boys who refused to be silenced by white men. I didn't expect to find a white man gasping for breath slung over my shoulders. I'm sure he didn't imagine surviving at the hands of the race he came out to fight against. I definitely didn't expect the footage of me potentially saving his life at the anti-black protest to go viral.

But what has shocked me the most is how one transformative image can have the power to break and recast a narrative.