

REMEMBER ME NOW

*A Journey
Back to
Myself and
a Love
Letter to
Black
Women*

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REMEMBER ME NOW

A Journey Back to
Myself and a Love Letter
to Black Women



FAITTH BROOKS



WATERBROOK

REMEMBER ME NOW

Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed
to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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Letter to the Reader



Dear Sister,

I want to set the table for you and me. This book is an invitation for us to commune with each other. Laugh, nod in agreement, fuss when we disagree, cry, and imagine our worlds a little better than we left them. This book is birthed from my story—one that includes pain, but pain doesn't have the last word. It doesn't get to control my story. As I journeyed through my own joy and pain, I was reminded that we sisters hold on to so much. This is my invitation to you to let go, to say no. To find yourself in the midst of whatever pain you may be feeling and to remember that trouble doesn't define you.

If you find yourself aching, feeling overwhelmed, overlooked, and misunderstood, I write for you. There is nothing more painful than trying to prove yourself when you should just be free to exist as you are. This is a space for us. No cliques allowed. You deserve to be seen, celebrated, and loved no matter who you are. This book is for you, sister. I remember the days of feeling lonely and left out,

when doubts filled my head and I wondered if I was worthy. But remember this, sis: You are indeed worthy. You are indeed loved.

There were many times I wondered if my words were eloquent enough, poetic enough, *enough*. The pain of comparison distracted me and caused me to focus on who I wasn't rather than who I was. Then I decided to dig deep. I learned that, in order for me to be the woman I know I am, I had to believe in myself. I had to trust that whatever I have to offer the world is enough because I am enough.

There are still moments when I doubt my ability, when I have to silence the lies, silence the fear, and believe the best. You are reading words straight from my soul. Straight from the depths of my insecurity, confidence, joy, and pain. Here I am and here you are—my sister. May we share in this moment of vulnerability as we celebrate Black sisterhood.

Rooting for you,
Faith

Introduction



There I was, hunched over on the floor. My breathing was rapid; my skin felt clammy. I'd just finished an on-line workout class. But that wasn't the cause of my distress.

I think I'm going to be sick. I think I'm having a panic attack!

I texted a friend, crying. The weight of what had happened a week before had caught up with me. Hard as I'd tried, I couldn't outrun the pain.

A few weeks before, on a boring quarantine night, I'd joined a popular dating app. I'd talked to a few guys on other apps during stay-at-home orders, but nothing had materialized. Dating during a pandemic sucks, by the way. I felt frustrated and wanted to meet someone who was at least willing to hold a conversation. After a while, "wyd" and "how was your day" texts get old. It was time to change it up a bit. Maybe pandemic love was waiting for me on another app?

One night I connected with a charismatic, funny man who knew how to hold a conversation. He was kind and

easy to be around. I felt like he saw me. We talked on the phone for hours and hung out a couple of times. I desperately wanted to be loved and known. He was interested in me, and that felt special.

My happiness was short-lived. One night he came over. I made dinner for us, and we talked, laughed, and played chess. Then he started making advances beyond what I was comfortable with. I'd already established my boundaries, but he used his words to manipulate me and push back. When it was over, he confidently declared, "I marked my territory." Those words still haunt me.

For the days, weeks, and months that followed, it was hard for me to process and understand what had indeed happened. I was afraid. I couldn't sleep. A replay of that night haunted my dreams. I blamed myself, questioning my judgment and what I could have done or said differently. I scolded myself for breaking my own rules of dating.

It was the summer of 2020—a trying time in our country. I spent most of my time creating anti-racism education resources, both in my day job and after work. It was easier for me to focus on doing something purposeful than to deal with my pain. I could hide the pain, but I couldn't hide being Black. It felt like a second civil rights wave was building, and I needed to be a part of it. So I put my personal pain in the back seat. It was the height of the nationwide outcry after the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, and my work at a racial literacy non-profit organization was busier than ever. I was finding my stride in my work away from work—advocating online, delivering to

the thousands more who began following me after a few posts went viral, and feeling inspired to write more than I had in years past. I was getting noticed by literary agents, booking podcast interviews, and fielding requests for speaking engagements. At work, I managed a team of program coordinators and volunteers, leading meaningful projects to produce valuable resources for the community.

Inside, I was devastated. But it didn't matter how I felt, because there was work to be done. With so much going on, I didn't think I could stop and do what I needed to do to take care of myself. I coped with the lingering pain by busying myself and showing up to advocate, speak at events, organize protests, and take care of the endless tasks at work. I operated like a true Enneagram Eight—there was a crisis, and I was ready to respond and fight injustice.

I knew that many things would remain the same in the country after this “watershed moment”; nevertheless, I felt I couldn't allow myself to ignore this moment in history and remain silent.

The murders of Breonna Taylor in March and Atatiana Jefferson the year before hit me in my gut. One day they were, like me, living life, pursuing love, playing video games with a nephew. The next day they were gone. From my recent experience, I knew how quickly an ordinary evening could turn into a tragedy that changed and consumed your life. I saw how easy it was for Black women and the pain we carry to be forgotten, our lives ended or upended. The silence from my white friends in the face of these tragedies made things crystal clear for me. If they weren't devastated

by the death of an unarmed twenty-six-year-old Black woman, what would compel them to care for me? If you can't see me in Breonna, then you don't see me. Knowing that hurt. Some white people around me, the ones who said they would stand by Faith, felt no compulsion to speak up for Breonna. Some days it felt like I was drowning in the waves of silence.

The indifference toward Breonna's life sent a strong message to Black women. I think it created a shift for Black women activists everywhere. I began to see Black women noting the futility of constantly engaging and educating white people about race. It began to feel like we were essentially trying to convince them of our humanity and worth.

But how could I shout "Protect Black Women" and "Say Her Name" and not prioritize *this* Black woman? Me. I had to remember me now in the same way I was begging people to remember my sisters. I had to see myself as worthy of receiving the same advocacy I was giving.

It would take a radical change for me to pursue the kind of healing I needed. Along the way I recognized I would need to address hurts going back to my childhood in order to understand how I'd gotten to this place—wounded and unable to prioritize my healing over the desire to be everything I thought everyone needed me to be. That realization took me back to the young me fighting to find my identity while striving to belong.

...

I am a Black woman with a God-given purpose. I was never designed to fit into Eurocentric standards of beauty and culture. I am my mother and father's daughter, my brother's sister, my grandparents' granddaughter, and my aunts' and uncles' niece. Most of all, I am my ancestors' legacy. I've been formed and loved by Black people. I cannot and will not show up as anyone other than who I am. I have community and I belong—my heart rests in this assurance. I have nothing to prove. I have peace, so I dance in my living room, cry when I need to, laugh often, take risks, and know I am worth loving. I am a liberated Black woman, embracing every ounce of who I am.

This is my mantra.

But it wasn't always this way.

In the course of my life, I struggled. Growing up, I'd adopt whatever interests my white friends had. I remember being proud when people said I was "a white Black girl."

The racial and social justice activist I am today hates to admit this on paper, but it's the truth. Being called "a white Black girl" made me feel accepted, valued, and safe.

I didn't know that assimilation was poison. I didn't know that assimilation was my way of avoiding the pain of rejection.

By God's grace, I eventually learned how assimilation was a deep betrayal of my community. In the school of experience, I learned that there is no scale measuring Blackness. I now reject the lie of "not Black enough" and have come to discover that we are always enough just as we are. Once I realized that I, a first-generation suburban Black

girl, was enough, I unlocked a new level of personal freedom.

Letting go of these harmful mindsets transformed my life and motivated me to fight not just for *my* mental health and peace but for other Black women also.

This book is the story of my journey as a single Black woman who was homeschooled and raised in conservative evangelical Christian culture and who grew up to become an activist.

I don't know about you, but I'm tired of being suffocated by white supremacy. I want to breathe again, and I suspect you do too.

It's hard out here.

How are we supposed to fit into a culture that was never ours? How are we supposed to fit into a beauty standard designed to exclude us? (A beauty standard that some Black men love and prefer.) I have felt undesirable and unable to fit into these boxes of belonging. The feeling was only multiplied when I was one of the few Black people in a friend group or one of the only Black women at an event, in a church service, or in a staff meeting. We have to endure a lot to survive in spaces where we are not fully seen.

And it affects us. Even when we get to grow up in an intentionally Black-affirming community, it still affects us.

Malcolm X had it right when he said, "The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman."

Our ancestors raised and nurtured generations of white

children, yet society has created a negative narrative of Black women as rude, loud, aggressive, unaffected, selfish, and the antithesis of desirable feminine energy. When you live in the shadow of whiteness, it's easy to feel like you're working overtime to prove that you're not who they assume you are. The stereotypes keep us trapped in a box. I want us to live freely.

Black women were never meant to live in this society with ease. Enslaved women had no agency or control over their bodies. Our ancestors tended to the enslavers' needs while learning to ignore their pain—the pain of losing children and partners, the pain of being beaten, raped, dehumanized, and disrespected—just to survive.

And here we are in the twenty-first century, still trying to survive being demeaned in subtle and overt ways in our jobs, churches, and academic institutions. We are even forgotten when we are victims of injustice.

If Black lives aren't going to matter to the larger society, we have to make sure our own Black lives matter to us. If we don't find a way to exist in our bodies without trauma consuming us, it will kill us, one way or another. We have to save ourselves.

...

My pursuit of divine inner peace has led me on a radical journey of self-care and self-love. In that pursuit of self-discovery, I've learned that healing isn't a solitary journey. We find healing in community. I write these stories and these letters for the communal care of my sisters. These are

the words that aided in my healing; I pray they will aid in yours too.

I have a passion for justice, people, and the community and being a vocal advocate for Black lives. But it's not the sum of who I am.

In these pages, I share how my Blackness has been formed and celebrated. How I've abandoned the pull toward whiteness in my search for belonging. How my faith has been resuscitated by a God who liberates from a white god who punishes.

I'm writing down what I wish I'd known while coming of age in majority-white Christian spaces. I wish I'd known that I could have the freedom to be who I am. I wish I could have embraced my Blackness earlier, even when society is more committed to loving a Black woman's features, style, and resilience than to actually loving and defending the woman herself.

I speak on behalf of my future daughters, nieces, sisters, and granddaughters and my mother, aunts, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers. I speak on behalf of my Black women friends and colleagues. We deserve a world where we are seen for who we are and not mainly in relation to whiteness. There is rest for us on the other side of pain and turmoil. Constant pain and devaluation are not our portions.

I write in honor of us. I pull from every hurt and triumph I experienced as a Black woman and write a living memorial to our beauty, tenderness, and strength. Loving ourselves in a world hell-bent on stifling us is a radical act

of resistance. And I do it boldly now for Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, Natasha McKenna, Michelle Cusseaux, and many more Black women whose lives were cut short.

We deserve our flowers now. Say it with me: “Remember me now!”

**REMEMBER
ME NOW**

1

Young, Black, and Homeschooled



Little girl brave

Little girl love

Little girl rage

Little girl hug

Little girl speak

Little girl lead

Little girl change

Little girl teach

Little girl dance

Little girl explore

Brown little girl—you deserve so much more

When I was fifteen, I asked my mom if I could join a speech class at a local homeschool co-op. So many of my friends had raved about their co-op experiences. They'd tell me how fun it was being in classes with their friends, and I saw the proof in the pictures they'd post on MySpace. It was like real school, just with better friends, and I wanted

to try it out. Plus, I've always loved to socialize, so I figured this would be a great way to expand my social circle. I pictured a *Boy Meets World* vibe.

The only problem was, we lived on the other side of town from my friends. So the nearest co-op we found was in Tomball, Texas.

At the time Tomball was very white and rural. This meant the co-op was too. But the homeschool community at large was already primarily white. Plus, my friends—both Black and white—still loved their co-op. How bad could this one be?

On my first day, my mom dropped me off and I couldn't wait. The co-op was hosted in a small church. The church lobby was full of kids studying and talking to friends. When I got past the lobby, there were a few stairs leading to the second-floor classrooms. My classroom was the first on the left. I approached the room with anticipation, ready to make new friends.

But when I walked in and realized I was the *only* Black girl, my heart sank. And the teacher—a random mom—had a weird vibe. Cherry on top, the class full of white kids didn't even seem like *cool* white kids.

This wasn't gonna be what I thought it was.

No new friends for my MySpace pictures.

I was friendly and outgoing, but already I knew I wouldn't have the same experience as my white friends. Seeing this group of white kids staring blankly at me, I knew I would have to work harder to be accepted and hopefully belong. Being the only Black girl wasn't new to

me, but I was nervous because I didn't already have friends there. At fifteen, I was old enough to discern that homeschooled white kids' perception of Black people was informed by the limited TV they were allowed to watch—so I felt an instant pressure to prove I was the opposite of what they thought Black people were.

I texted my mom on my little Nokia: “Come get me right after this class.” I wouldn't be staying late to hang out.

The next couple of months were rough. Though my classmates were all polite, I never made the friends I was hoping to make. And the teacher was just weird. Thankfully she never said anything crazy to me, but she was never welcoming. Never warm toward me the way she was toward the other students. And certain statements she'd make about this church not teaching “biblical truth” and that church promoting “a prosperity gospel” (a church we attended) made me feel even more excluded.

When you're a kid, it's nice to feel affirmed by your teacher. And when that affirmation is absent—but offered in abundance to every other student—it does something to you.

One of the major assignments in this class was to choose a speech and present it to my teacher and classmates. I chose an excerpt from “I Have a Dream” by Martin Luther King, Jr. I rehearsed my presentation for weeks. I memorized phrases, then sentences, then the whole section of this iconic speech.

On the day of my speech, I sat in my usual spot in the back left corner of the room. Though I'd felt out of place in

this class in the past, this day you couldn't tell me nothin'! I was ready to take up space and be heard. Our classroom was small, with about nine desks. Since it was used for Sunday school on the weekend, the walls were bare, with no classroom decorations. There were six of us in the class, and I was ready to give the best speech they had ever heard. Dressed up in black slacks and a cream blouse, I confidently walked to the front of the class, armed with powerful words, thinking my reiteration of MLK's dream of a nation without prejudice would convict the hearts of the listeners. I spoke with power and conviction. I was finally sharing my truth with white people. I delivered stirring words on peace and equality—how could people *not* feel compelled? When I said the last word of my speech, I felt like I was on top of the world. I killed it and I knew it. I looked at the room, waiting for a standing ovation or “Bravo, Faithh!”

The moment of glee was short-lived. The kids gave me fake smiles and a golf clap. It turned out the words had no magic. I was disappointed. I thought the words would move people; instead, they stared at me. Maybe MLK's dream wasn't so easy? I knew a lot hadn't changed, but I thought his speech changed people. I thought I would change people. This was a wake-up call for me. Talking about race was hard, and trying to live up to MLK's ideals was even harder when people didn't share my dream for equality.

The following week, I got my grade for the speech. It was low. So low that my heart deflated. I knew this was about more than feedback on my speaking abilities. I'd worked so hard to prepare for this speech. I was so upset I

cried. During the drive home, I unloaded to my mom and told her about the previous interactions with the teacher that hadn't felt right. She heard my concerns and decided to meet with the teacher and give her a few things to think about.

"I want you to be in spaces that are affirming and uplifting," my mom told me.

I never went back.

...

I was born in Chicago, and by the time I was six years old, my parents had moved four times to different parts of the city. When we lived in the city apartments, my parents never let my brother and me play outside without supervision. My dad's dream was for our family to move to the suburbs, where we would be able to ride our bikes on the street, explore freely, and not come home until the streetlights came on.

This led us to our next home: a town-house rental in a racially diverse neighborhood in Park Forest, a suburb of Chicago. It was a lovely city with big trees and long roads, and it was close to my dad's job at Ford Motor Company. The town house backed up to the woods. And though I remember playing outside a lot with the neighbor kids, my most vivid memories are of the deer, raccoons, and other wildlife I saw outside my window every day. It was magical in my six-year-old brain. I loved to look out my window in the morning to see what animal I might spot next. I would beg my mom to let me feed bread to the raccoons. Occa-

sionally she conceded, and I would walk outside in my favorite purple-and-pink romper and lay the bread out. Then I would run back inside to watch the raccoons eat the food. Park Forest, Illinois, was the perfect mix of nature and a six-year-old's imagination. I had a lot of fun in that town house with my brother, sliding down the stairs in our sleeping bags, riding our bikes, and laughing with the neighborhood kids.

We got together with our large and loving extended family at least once a month. My dad's family is very big and loves to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, new babies, and weddings. The family even gathers for funerals. You can expect a family event to have lots of soul food, with music bumping, drinks flowing, kids running around, and a whole lot of laughter. I have a blunt family, the kind that will fight for you if anyone messes with you but will also tell you if you gained weight recently. My brother and I have thirteen first cousins, and we are all close in age. My dad and his siblings prioritized keeping their kids connected to one another. My mom's family is smaller and not as loud but is full of the same love. In Chicago, home wasn't about the city; it was about the people, my family.

My maternal great-grandfather, Charlie, migrated to Chicago from Arkansas to escape being lynched. He was a sharecropper, and my great-grandmother was a homemaker and entrepreneur. She stayed home with their five children while he worked in the fields. One day the owner of the land my grandpa Charlie worked on gave my grandmother Evelyn some instructions for sharecropping. Later that day,

my grandpa Charlie confronted the owner, telling him, “If you have instructions, you tell them to me and not my wife. She does not work here.” Grandpa Charlie’s actions were seen as defiant by the landowner. The other sharecroppers told him he needed to leave because things were going to get tough—and they didn’t want things to get worse for the rest of them. They were scared for Grandpa Charlie and worried about the consequences they could face because of his actions. To save his life and his family, Grandpa Charlie connected with his sister in Chicago, and they made a plan for him to get there. After settling into Chicago, Grandpa Charlie got a job, and once he had enough money, he sent for his family. Together they built a new life, and my grandfather was born. Chicago became home.

So, when I was six years old and my parents announced we were moving down south to Texas to be part of a growing ministry, you can imagine my grandparents’ shock. As much as my grandpa Charlie and grandma Evelyn loved the open fields in Arkansas, they never moved back because the South couldn’t be home anymore. They’d lived the history of millions of other Black families escaping the violence and terror of the South during what was called the Great Migration. They’d lived through family separation before. They were sad we couldn’t all be together, sad they would miss seeing us grow up.

On my mother’s side of the family, we were the first grandchildren. My aunt even moved from California back to Chicago to see us grow up. There was a lot of deep grief for our family. No one tried to convince my parents to stay,

but they wondered what kind of life we would be able to build so far from home.

On our last day in Chicago, my grandfather took us out to see *Space Jam* and get our favorite fried chicken. When he dropped us off at the airport, he cried. We were all so sad about the distance that lay before us.

In Texas, my dad continued to work twelve- to sixteen-hour shifts at a Ford plant, and my mom homeschooled us. We were, as my brother says, “first-generation suburbs.” In other words, we had just enough income to be considered middle-class, but not enough cushion for much extra. I saw my dad work overtime so our family could live off one income and so my brother and I could have the homeschool education they felt strongly about. They wanted to tailor our education to our unique abilities and learning styles without the restrictions of a traditional learning environment. My extended family thought we would turn out weird, so they objected to my parents’ homeschooling us. There weren’t a lot of Black families homeschooling back then, but my mom’s best friend, Debbie, was also determined to homeschool her kids. Our families supported each other as we veered from the norm.

In Dallas, my parents had a close group of friends with kids the same age as me and my brother. Those parents became my aunts and uncles, and the kids were my best girlfriends. In this Black community, I felt known and safe.

That became the beautiful thing about Dallas. In Chicago, we were surrounded by a family that ran deep. In Dallas, we had friends as family.

One friend made me feel particularly known and safe. Shortly after we moved to Dallas, my brother and I attended children's church one Sunday. Children's church was held in a large gym. I clung tightly to my brother as we walked into the room. Kids were laughing, playing, talking, joking around. Kirk Franklin's song "Stomp" was playing in the background; kids were dancing all along the sides of the gym or swaying to the beat. As we walked to the center of the gym, I saw that we had to pick a seat. The boys had to sit on one side, and the girls had to sit on the other side. I looked at my brother with pure dread and squeezed his arm, worried about sitting apart. He pried my hands off his arm and nudged me to find my own seat. With trepidation, I turned to the other side, where the girls were sitting. I was hoping that maybe I would sit next to someone nice. I surveyed the rows and saw a girl whose hair was in two pony-tails with little click-clacks at the end. She seemed nice. She smiled as I sat down and looked at her.

"Hi. My name is Faith. What's yours?"

"Hello! My name is Ashley."

We exchanged kind glances as we looked around the room, taking in an environment that was new to both of us. Then we pointed out our siblings to each other. We were both the younger of two siblings, so we were kindred spirits. We immediately bonded.

Over time, our friendship went far beyond church because our parents served in ministry together and our families became close friends. My parents rarely let me sleep over at anyone's home, but they allowed me to sleep over

with Ashley and her sister, Brittney. They quickly became like family to us. We did family dinners and social outings, and we played together all the time. Ashley's friendship was invaluable to me. We played with dolls, roller-skated at the local rink, played jump rope outside, drew with chalk, played charades and hide-and-go-seek—Ashley and I were stuck like glue.

Almost everything we could do together we did, aside from going to the same school.

Best friends are sacred. And first best friends are something special. Ashley was that for me. I don't know if we ever really take into account how special these formative childhood friendships are. When I consider this friendship, this upbringing, I realize that *identity* and *belonging* were never big questions, because identity and belonging were a given in this friendship, in this community. This truth stretches to the present day: I never have to beg my Black sisters to see me because they know what it feels like to be unseen.

The story of how I met my friends Eboni and Reygan at church is similar to how I met Ashley. Most of us were first-generation suburban kids. My closest friends from ages six to twelve were Black, and we lived within twenty minutes of all of them. I felt understood by them.

But I didn't feel understood by all Black kids.

"First-generation suburbs" also meant that sometimes I felt like I wasn't "Black enough."

"You talk white," kids at church would tease me. It was frustrating because I thought I was doing the right thing.

“Enunciate your words; speak the King’s English,” my mom emphasized at home. Slang was forbidden, and “proper English” was expected. Today I understand that she was doing what she thought was best. She taught her kids how to navigate a white world—she gave us the toolbox and rule book for speaking and carrying ourselves. She taught us how to talk to the cashier, look them in the eye, and talk to them on our own.

“You will have to do these things without me one day,” she’d tell us. So she taught us accordingly. But there were certain Black spaces that this would isolate me from.

There always seemed to be some things I didn’t relate to culturally. In the 1990s and early 2000s, TV shows like *Moesha*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Family Matters*, and *Sister, Sister* welcomed us all into a celebration of Black culture and our lived experiences. I was one of those Christian kids whose parents didn’t allow them to listen to secular music. Now, let’s be real, in high school, I did sneak and listen to JoJo, Coldplay, Destiny’s Child, John Legend, and John Mayer. But for the most part, I didn’t understand a lot of jokes and cultural references.

My parents were picky about the kind of music and TV they let us tune in to. “You have your whole life to be a grown-up and listen to grown-up stuff,” they’d say. “So enjoy being a kid.” I didn’t know then that that was a gift—the gift of truly being a child, not having to worry about adult problems. But to a kid who felt left out, this gift felt more like a hindrance.

. . .

This was Dallas: friends as family, and the safety of Black communities all around me—even if I did get teased about not being “Black enough” here and there. In Dallas, we Black girls were the main characters.

But all that changed when we moved to Houston. My Black girl magic crew in Dallas was gone, and now I was hanging out with white girls. As a pre-teen who wanted to be liked and included, I found one particular group of cool white girls who were nice enough to me, so we became a friend group. I began hearing things like “You’re an Oreo. You’re not like the other Black girls.” These were intended as words of invitation, belonging, affirmation—and indeed, these words made me feel invited and affirmed.

Little did I know, these words were slowly severing my soul. It’s like hearing people talking poorly about someone who’s in the room. And instead of defending that person, you go along with it. Except the person they’re talking about is you.

As time went on, I realized that belonging had become a fight. I missed and longed for the ease of the friendships I had with my Black girlfriends in Dallas. Deep down inside, when I saw their updates on MySpace and Facebook and all the events and birthday parties and trips, I felt left behind, left out. I remember thinking, *I will regain that Black sisterhood. I will get back what I’m missing in my life.*

. . .

I was annoyed with comments like these:

“Is all of that your hair?”

“You are the whitest Black girl I’ve ever met.”

“You’re one of us.”

“You may be whiter than me!”

“You are smart for a Black girl.”

But in a weird way I was also happy to be accepted. I wanted to fit in, so I tolerated the ignorant statements. Honestly, I didn’t know what to say back to people sometimes, and I didn’t want to cause drama. I wanted to keep the peace and my friendships. I didn’t see it for the white supremacist language it was. But by the time I was turning sixteen, the tide started to change for me.

In my first job at my local Christian bookstore, I remember stocking the shelves and noticing a pattern. Books on spiritual formation? White author. Books on prayer? White author. Books on marriage? White author, white author, white author. I wished to come across a book written with me in mind—a book written to a young Black girl by a Black woman. With so few to be found, the message was clear: Black women’s voices and stories didn’t matter. But I wasn’t buying it. Something deep within me knew that our stories were worth telling. I resolved to start doing that for myself, to begin the search for my own voice. I had started by using MLK’s words in a speech, and I was inching closer to finding what was missing.

...

When I reflect on my childhood and teen years, I can see the pieces of my story coming together. Delivering a section of MLK's speech to a class of all white people felt eerily similar to what it feels like today to prove your humanity. Since then, I've given many speeches, trying to inspire people to care.

Revisiting these memories, I can still feel the tension in the air, the eyes on me, the whispers. I—no, *we*—live with the wounds inflicted on us by a racialized society. These moments are difficult to articulate because there's usually no smoking gun. #IYKYK.

I remember my mom's words: "*I want you to be in spaces that are affirming and uplifting.*"

College would soon take me on a journey toward finding those spaces.

A Letter to the Black Suburban Girl

Dear Li'l Sis,

You were born with a freedom that you must hold on to. No one had to teach you how to say no or set boundaries. You are decisive and resolute.

The world is so simple for you, and I wish I could keep it that way. Little do you know, insecure people will try to strip you of your confidence and silence your voice. Society will want you to “pipe down,” “fit in,” “dress like us,” “think like us,” and act grown too soon.

When your whimsical joy and laughter are quenched, don't give in. Fight tooth and nail to stay true to yourself. There is only a world of unlearning ahead of you when you believe the lie that you must conform to be accepted. It's okay to chart your own path.

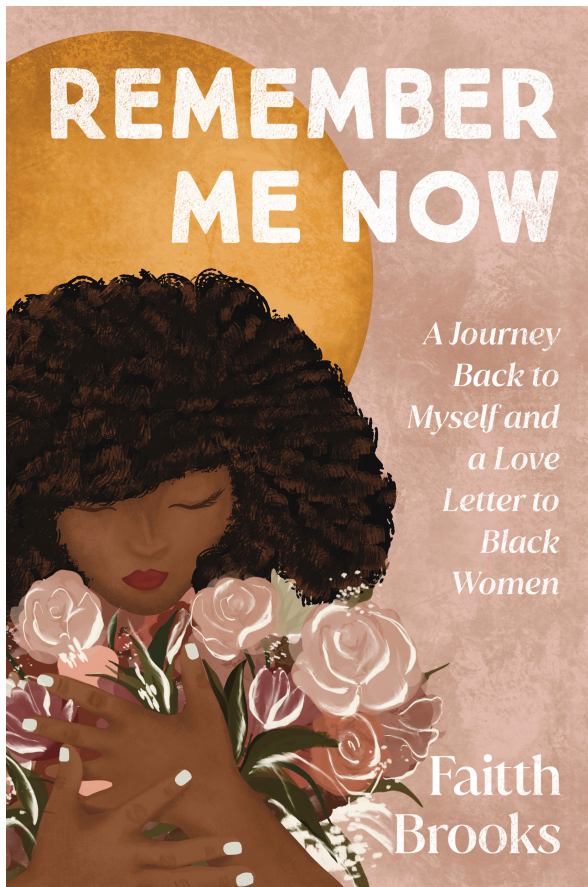
Don't get discouraged when you don't see other Black girls around you. Your Black girl crew will come. Find ways to revel in and celebrate your Black girl identity. If you can't find Black sisterhood in person, discover ways to connect with other Black women online. Don't silence yourself to fit in when you're the only Black girl in school, in church, or on your team. You will experience rejection. When others can't accept

you, the whole you, it's their loss.

Learn how to choose yourself. Say yes to the things you desire and no to the things you feel obligated to do to fit in. You will have to choose yourself over and over again. Use your voice to advocate for yourself and others who are being excluded. When you're tired from fighting for room to exist and breathe deeply without restraint, let the tears fall. You aren't the only one fighting to stay true to yourself. We're all in this together. Your tears are not tears of weakness but tears of longing to stay connected in a world where disconnection is the norm.

Little girl, you are braver than you imagine. You are free. Seeing you laugh and live freely will inspire others to do the same. No one gets to write your story but you. Get your pen out; you don't want to miss a thing.

Faithh



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