

Aaminah Shakur

LETTER 3: IT WASN'T YOUR FAULT

Dear Sister,

It wasn't your fault; it was never your fault. You did nothing wrong. Hold this tight to your heart: it wasn't your fault.

At night when you lay there and your mind fills with images and you wonder *if only, if you had...if you hadn't...*remember, it wasn't your fault.

When you talk to someone—family, friend, therapist, co-worker, another survivor—you will get the sense that they wonder why you wore that, went there, didn't think, didn't know, seemed willing, were unsure and unclear, didn't scream, didn't bite...*why why why*...remember, no matter what they tell you, it wasn't your fault.

If you whispered, "I love you," it still wasn't your fault.

If you let it be known that you like girls instead, it still wasn't your fault.

If you had said yes before, it did not give permission this time, and it still wasn't your fault.

If you said "maybe later," it still wasn't your fault that he wouldn't wait.

If you slept with his friend or "everyone knows

you're easy," it doesn't mean they own you and have a right. It still wasn't your fault.

If you let him in when he was drunk in the middle of the night, it was not an invitation to sex, and it still wasn't your fault.

You didn't confuse him. You did not owe him for anything. You didn't deserve it.

You didn't make him do it, drive him crazy, make it easier, give him unspoken permission.

When he ignored your words, when he touched you without your permission, when he used your body against your wishes—it was his fault. Not yours.

It was never your fault. Hold this tight to your heart.

Shanna Katz

LETTER 4: YOUR LIGHT

Dear Sister,

There was a hole inside of me.

For days, weeks, months, I couldn't stand it: the pain, the questioning, the wondering, the surges of mixed feelings coursing through my body. He'd hurt me, violated me, torn me apart with his words, his touch, and his apathy. Curling into a small ball, I hoped to minimize my presence in this world, to become smaller and smaller, until, eventually, I could completely disappear.

I was broken.

And then I was saved. Not by God, or any goddess. Not by any higher power. I was saved by my self, by the light deep down inside me. One day, from the depths of the darkness inside of me, there was a spark of light. This spark refused to be put out, regardless of how hard I tried. This light sustained me; it saved me.

This light is in you, and it *is* you. It is the happier moments in your life; it is your spark, your spirit, and your strength. As you tend to it, this light will grow, giving you whatever it is that you need to survive.

This light is the strength you need to reclaim your life. It is the power to re-enter the world as a

strong(er), powerful woman. It is what you need to leave your partner, to file a complaint with the police or courts, to move away, to go back to that park/room/store/bar, or to never go back again. Whatever it is *you* need to do, that is exactly what the light will help you to do.

I know you have this light and once you find it, it grows. As people around you continue to support you, it grows even more. Your own hopes, dreams, and even letting go of your fears will also feed this luminary source. It will expand its glow from deep inside your heart and help you shine in this world of ours.

Perhaps it is a tiny flicker, or just a muted glow, but it's there, I promise. You and you alone have enough strength to survive. Friends, family, and others can help, but you already have it inside. Just allow yourself to find that light, to embrace its power, to let it show you the way.

Just when it seems like the dark will swallow you whole, that is when you must find your light. Reach out to it, and then reach out to others.

You are not alone. You are never alone.

Shanna

Viannah E. Duncan

LETTER 5: I BELIEVE YOU

Dear Sister,

I believe you.

I knew the man who attacked me. We had dated exclusively at one point and I had even considered him a close friend. The day after it happened, he called me to tell me he wanted to come over to my apartment to “talk about it.”

I told him no.

He came over anyway.

I stood in the kitchen washing dishes while he sat to my left at the table, trying to get me to look at him, to acknowledge his words, to sit down and talk with him “like a reasonable adult.”

The table was white. My roommate and I barely used the table at all except as a place to leave our stuff when we came in the door. But at that moment, it was empty except for him sitting there, anxiously trying to make me sit down for a “real talk.”

“Come on,” he said after I refused to sit down, “you’re being completely unreasonable about this.”

I didn’t have the cutting remarks on my tongue just yet. It was too fresh. I just said, “I’m not being unreasonable. I want you to leave.”

“You know I can’t leave until we both understand what happened. I don’t know why you’re acting this way.”

I was incredulous at the same time that I was heartbroken. I stood there, elbow-deep in soapy water, unable to do anything except wash dishes.

This was the man whom I had loved my freshman year. And this was the same guy who, the night before, had asked me in that same voice, “But we’ve done it before; why is this time any different? I thought you liked it rough.”

I had never been afraid of his weight or strength before; I’d never been given a reason to fear him. He’d been stumbling drunk the previous night and I had even thought to myself, “At least he’s not an aggressive drunk.” I trusted him.

I had been warned about strangers. I was told to always walk in groups and to keep a buddy with me at all times. I never thought that he, who had always been protective of me in the past, would end up being the very person I needed to be protected from.

I was in denial. It couldn’t have been...that. The word “rape” was too much. I replayed that night in my head again and again as I tried to figure out how I could’ve prevented it, all the while trying to convince myself that I was overreacting.

He was also trying to persuade me that I was mistaken, and I was furious at him for it; why did he think he knew my own thoughts and feelings better than I did? Here he was, pleading for “a chance to be heard.” Here he was, again, not even twenty-four hours later, still unwanted, still forcing himself on me. He had no memory of the previous night, he said, but that I must have misunderstood the

situation because he wasn't that kind of guy. He told me I was exaggerating and overreacting and obviously too emotional to really know what I was accusing him of and...

...and I wanted to scream.

I wanted to hurt him the way he'd hurt me. I wanted him to understand. I wanted him to remember. But there, in that moment, elbow-deep in dishwasher, none of those things happened.

He said his piece. He even insisted I sit down across from him because he said I wasn't taking the conversation seriously while I was doing other things. He sat there and took what he wanted from me. Again.

Later, after he'd finally left, I called my then-boyfriend and told him—between sobs—what had happened. He said, “Is that all? That doesn't sound so bad; it could've been a lot worse. Are you sure you're not taking this too personally? You might be blowing this out of proportion, don't you think?”

I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to believe it was that bad, either.

But it was.

Sister, I'm not telling you this to gain sympathy or tell you, “I know what it feels like.” I'm telling you because I wanted—needed—to be believed but wasn't.

I believe you. And I believe it was as bad as you say it was. I don't know what happened to you, but I believe you.

Viannah