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**THIS
IS
THE
FIRE**

What I Say to My Friends About Racism

DON LEMON

Anchor of CNN TONIGHT

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**What I Say to My
Friends About
Racism**

DON LEMON



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*To the memory of those who paved the way,
with gratitude to those who march in their footsteps:*

*James Baldwin, my sister Leisa, and all the not-so-
obvious heroes*

who daily take a stand for truth.

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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

Prologue

A Letter to My Nephew

May 25, 2020

Dear Trushaad,

Today I heard a dying man call out to his mama, and I wept for the world that will soon belong to you. I know what comes next as surely as I know the Mississippi rolls down to the sea.

The weeping passes, and rage takes hold.

The rage burns out, and blame begins.

The blame bounces back and forth, and promises are made.

The promises wither, and complacency returns.

And the complacency stays. It stagnates like a lullaby on autoplay, until another man dies facedown on another street in another city, and the weeping begins again.

I was the baby boy in our family until thirteen years ago, when you came along and made a grandmother of my big sister Leisa. Your grandmother helped raise me, and I helped raise your mother, so when you were born, it all came full circle. You look like me. We share the same forehead, nose, and well-articulated arm bones. We share the same skin, a dark russet color rich with history. Yours is darker than mine in winter, but in the summertime, I gravitate in your direction.

“I know you,” I said the first time I saw you.

You made me believe I was beautiful, because there was not one thing I would change about you—not the kinky hair I had tried

so hard to relax, nor the tapered nose that failed to match my father's, and no, absolutely not that rich russet skin. My hope, then and now, is for you to embrace your beautiful Blackness with an ease I never mastered, no matter how many times your grandmother told me I was a thing of beauty.

I spent my early childhood in the home of my own grandmother, Mame (pronounced *mah-ME*), who was a wonder. She could balance the world in a laundry basket, bake cathead biscuits, and tell a great story, all at the same time.

“Before Dr. King and the Freedom Riders and all that, we go to vote, and the poll watcher, he says, ‘Naw, you gotta first pay this money,’ so you pay that money, and then he says, ‘Okay, you gotta tell me—how many jelly beans in this here jar. How many soap bubbles in a bar of soap.’ Meanwhile, you see White people walk up. ‘Oh, hello! Yes, ma’am. Sign here. Go right on in.’ Things went on that I can’t even tell you.”

If you couldn’t prove you had more than a fifth-grade education, which is all Mame had, the state of Louisiana required a literacy test. Between bold lines across the top, it said:

Do what you are told to do in each statement, nothing more, nothing less. Be careful as one wrong answer denotes failure of the test. You have 10 minutes to complete the test.

A convoluted list of questions followed.

Draw a line around the number or letter of this sentence.

In the first circle below, write the last letter of the first word that starts with L.

In the space below, draw three circles, one engulfed by another.

I couldn’t comprehend such a thing. I kept asking her about it, trying to make sense of it, and one day I broke down crying, overwhelmed by the realness of life for people like us. There was something deeply, terribly wrong—something much bigger than a house or a sugarcane factory or Louisiana itself. I didn’t know how to change it, but I knew Mame struggled with her reading, so I eagerly learned to read, wanting to help her. We played school at her kitchen table.

That was education for my grandmother. My mother went to a

segregated school. My big sisters went to integrated public schools. I went to an all-Black Catholic school, and now you go to a mostly White laboratory school, where they test-drive advances in education theory and technology. I wonder what Mame would say if she could see the computers and green spaces.

I want to celebrate that arc, but the fact of how far we've come only serves to highlight how far back we started and how far we've yet to go.

One circle engulfed by another.

The day you were born, I saw Leisa take up the mantle of a Black grandmother, and I understood something I was too little to know about Mame. I saw the protective stance of my sister—the power of her tenderness, the ferocity of her love—and I felt the embrace of all these formidable women who hold our family in their arms. From the moment of my birth, they sheltered me. From the moment of your birth, I was wise enough to know the preciousness of that stronghold and the price they paid for it.

Tru, the man who died—his name was George—he begged for that embrace when he could no longer beg for breath. He called for his mama as he felt the last of his life unravel. The last thread left between his body and soul was love, and as terrible as this was to witness, it spurred a tidal swell of love in me. For my mama. For Mame. For my sisters. For you, TruTru, and for your little cousin Cairo.

Weeping.

Rage.

Blame.

Promises.

Complacency.

If our last honest breath is not love, I don't know how we live to fight through it all again.

I need to believe we'll wake up, rise up, and stay standing this time. My greatest fear is that the world will jade itself and grow

numb, that the death rattle of a man who looks like you and me will no longer move the world to tears, that there will be no tears left, no purifying rage, no chafing blame, no hopeful promise—only the wax-museum visage of complacency.

You're old enough to know what's going on, approaching the precipice where you'll begin to understand. Soon you'll see the difference between those who preach, those who march, and those who maintain a deferential silence while the bullhorn of racism blares the same foul tropes it's been sounding for four hundred years. I promise you, Tru, because I love you: I will not stand among the silent. Silence is no longer an option.

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Do I But Dream

A comfortable two-hour drive from the Midtown headquarters of CNN, not far from the Sag Harbor home I share with my fiancé, Tim, a truncated boardwalk path cuts through the dune grass and gives way to tawny sand on the beach at Sag Harbor Bay. A stone marker at the trailhead honors the founder of this extraordinary enclave, an African American neighborhood on prime beachfront real estate.

“In grateful recognition of Maude K. Terry,” it says. “Do I but dream.”

Docile green waves lap at the shore where Indigenous people, the Shinnecock, withstood bleak pre-Columbian winters and bloody raids by the neighboring Pequot until Europeans arrived on the continent in the 1500s, bringing Bibles and smallpox. The Shinnecock had no immunity to the virus, of course, and little energy left over to resist the Holy Spirit. Two-thirds of their population was wiped out within a few years. Able-bodied survivors went to work on Melvillesque whaling vessels, some of which were outfitted for the clandestine purpose of “blackbirding”: the acquisition, by coercion or outright kidnapping, of Indigenous people from faraway islands and coastal regions to labor on cotton and sugar plantations in Europe and the Colonies.

In July 1619, legislative representatives from eleven large New World settlements met in Jamestown, Virginia, to establish the standards and practices that would lay a foundation for the democracy they aspired to build. One month later, at nearby Point Comfort, about two dozen Angolan men and women were offloaded and sold by Portuguese slave traders. Thus the dream of democracy and the nightmare of slavery were born in the same urgent