

# DEALS

W I T H T H E

# DEVIL

AND OTHER REASONS TO RIOT

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### WHY I WRITE

Yesterday, as I was writing this, my neighbor, my sister, had to call the police to protect her from her husband, also my neighbor and my brother, who was threatening to douse them both with gasoline and light it in a murder/suicide if she did not stop divorce proceedings and come back to be his wife.

Last week after class, one of my students waited for me to confess softly that her boyfriend had been beating her and what should she do?

A month ago, a young friend who teaches preschool read to me from her journals a harrowing description of the night her former lover shot himself in the head after she escaped from his apartment following months of beating and torture.

My friend the corporate executive relates a story of leaping from a speeding car and running into some urban woods after her husband placed a gun to her temple while driving with her down a busy suburban street.

My friend the well-respected public servant comes to work with sunglasses to hide the two black eyes her husband gave

her by beating her head against the wall while their children slept in the next room.

My sisterwriter with the three young children tells horror stories of being scalded with boiled water and forced to suck the barrel of a gun as if it was her husband's penis.

And my memory of my own nightmare as an undergraduate student at Howard University, listening to my boyfriend tell me I'd better not move as he tied my hands and feet and told me if he couldn't have me, nobody could.

But that's not all. I also remember the chorus of black male objections to Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls*. I hear the protests over Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and I remember the forums whining about negative images of black men in *The Women of Brewster Place*, and I wonder where those same black male voices are when black male violence is being condoned and taught and glamorized and ignored. I wonder when we are going to see the same commitment to fighting sexism in the work of our brotherwriters that we see to fighting racism. I wonder how much good all those poems about beautiful African queens can do in the face of a backhand slap across the mouth and a merciless rape in the bedroom of your own house.

I wonder why Haki Madhubuti and Zaron Burnett, Jr., and Donald Stone are the exceptions and not the rule when their works focus on black male responsibility for admitting to and then stopping the war that is being waged against black women and children by the men who should be our closest allies and most ardent advocates.

But one thing I do not wonder about anymore is why I am writing and what concerns shape and focus my politics, my aesthetics, my form and my content. I remember exactly when it became clear to me.

It was my birthday. My forty-first birthday, to be exact. And it began like any other day with me stumbling out of bed

to wake my daughter, wishing it wasn't still dark outside in the winter when you have to get up early and wondering what to fix for breakfast. The breakfast question led me into the kitchen where I flipped on the morning news to be sure my country had not invaded somebody while I was sleeping. That's when I heard it.

"A lone gunman, armed with an automatic weapon, opened fire on a group of female students in Montreal, killing fourteen and wounding thirteen others. The man, who apparently had a grudge against women, shouted, 'You're all feminists!' before firing point-blank into a group of female students."

The anchorwoman read the copy with the bland unconcern that is her trademark and then went on to tell me about the approach of a winter storm. But I didn't hear it. I was stunned. What kind of murderer was this? Was he angry enough at feminism to pick a random bunch of young women and shoot them down in cold blood? I was angry and frightened and confused.

When I got the morning paper, it didn't do much to reassure me. Photographs on the front page showed wounded women being carried out of the classroom building where they had been shot. Their friends huddled around in small, weeping groups, trying to understand and cope with their grief. A policeman called to the scene found his own daughter among the dead and dying. A male student who survived said, "I heard the gunman say, 'I want the women!' He separated us into two groups, the guys in one corner and the girls in another. When that was done, he asked the guys to leave and then he just started shooting."

I got through the rest of my morning routine, although I don't know how. My daughter shared my shock and horror at what had happened and although I saw the questions in her eyes, I didn't have the reassuring answers that mothers

are always supposed to have, no matter what. I didn't have any way to explain to her what this kind of killing was about. I didn't even have a way to explain it to myself yet. It was just scary.

I spent the day looking for news about the gunman and hoping I wouldn't find it. I watched the television broadcasts, listened to the radio reports and made sure I got the afternoon paper for any updated information, but it didn't help me understand more or feel any better. Finally, I had to admit to myself that I wasn't really looking for any explanations. I was looking for a news bulletin that said it was all a mistake. That it had never happened. That a crazy man had not chosen as his target women he identified as feminists, whether they identified themselves that way or not.

By the end of the day, I had to admit that no bulletin was forthcoming. The facts and the death toll remained as grim as they had been when I first heard it on the morning news. The only question that remained was what I was going to do about it.

I was at a loss as to what the correct response should be. I am not a violent person. I own no weapons and have never been in a fight in my life. I am not an organizer and I have no troops to marshal with marching songs and battle plans. What I do is write about what I see and what I feel and what I know in the hope that it will help the people who read it see more and feel more and know more.

It was clear to me by nightfall that the only question I had to answer in the face of the act of war committed against women in Montreal was why I am writing. So I said a prayer for my fallen sisters and for the five women who are murdered in America every day by their husbands or ex-husbands or boyfriends and tried to answer the question as honestly as I could so I wouldn't forget it when there were no headlines or front-page horror stories to remind me.

I am writing to expose and explore the point where racism and sexism meet. I am writing to help myself understand the full effects of being black and female in a culture that is both racist and sexist. I am writing to try and communicate that information to my sisters first and then to any brothers of goodwill and honest intent who will take the time to listen.

I am writing because five women a day are murdered by the men who say they love them. I am writing because rape is. I am writing because I am a daughter and a mother and a lover and a sister and a womanist. I am writing to understand. I am writing so I won't be afraid. I am writing so I won't start crying again. I am writing because nobody even said the word sexism to me until I was thirty years old and I want to know why.

I am writing because I have seen my friends bleed to death from illegal abortions. I am writing because I have seen my sisters tortured and tormented by the fathers of their children. I am writing because I almost married a man who beat me regularly and with no remorse. I am writing because my daughter is almost old enough to start "dating" and I don't know how to tell her to protect herself from what I cannot even fully articulate to myself.

I am writing to allow myself to feel the anger. I am writing to keep from running toward it or away from it or into anybody's arms. I am writing to find solutions and pass them on. I am writing to find a language and pass it on.

I am writing, writing, writing, for my life.

*Think of this as a workbook.*