# Claiming Ourselves, Claiming Survival

Asha Bandele learns that she must accept pain before she can move past it.

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When I tell him our marriage is over, I am matter-of-fact, unemotional. Ours has been a difficult union. Despite the fact that I am certain that he's my kindred spirit, despite our years of planning our future, it's been hard. Married, we have grappled with many external challenges, not the least of which is prison—my husband is incarcerated. But now we have a child, a girl born five years after we exchanged vows, and I find I cannot balance prison with motherhood. And just like that, I assume I will move on, go home, go to work and parent my child as though there has not been some seismic shift in my life. How could I not believe this would be the case? I come from a long line of folks who believe that women can't break. We believe in sisters who can absorb any blow—every blow—and keep it moving. We believe this even as we see women in our communities swollen with food or alcohol or bitterness. We believe all those hard, hurt feelings are banished because we demanded that it be so. This is not the truth. But I didn't understand that until I woke up one day, and, looking at myself, didn't see myself. I saw instead an angry woman who spent too many nights crying, drinking and smoking. And I didn't want this to be the legacy I left for the children in my life, which is why I began to seek help and finally acknowledged that I was hurting—and it's why I am writing this now. I'm writing, certainly, to bear witness to my own life, to shed my own remnants of denial and distortions about how things were and are, but more, I'm writing for all of our children who must learn from us that pain and sorrow are natural, to be felt, examined and transcended. We don't need to stuff these feelings down, wallow in misery or spew our agony onto others. We have a right to all of ourselves, to the whole of our hearts. When we claim this, we claim the very thing that will ensure our very survival.

*Asha Bandele is the author of the award-winning memoir, The Prisoner's Wife (Scribner). Her book about single parenting, black women and depression will be out early next year.*

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