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So, over the last few days I've done a lot of linking and reposting, but I haven't really done a lot of speaking about my personal experience to explain where I'm coming from. Please, bear with me for a few minutes. Hopefully, it'll help you understand why I feel the way I do about what's been going on.

The first time I was acutely aware of my Blackness, I was probably 6 or 7 years old. Like, before then obviously I knew I was Black, but I hadn't really had it put in my face like this until I was about 6 or 7. I used to go to daycare back then, and we went on a field trip to a water park one time. One of the other boys from the daycare came up to me and told me he was surprised I was going on the trip because his dad told him all colored people were afraid of the water since we sink to the bottom. He didn't know he was being offensive. He was just curious why someone who would sink to the bottom would want to go to a water park.

I can remember being in elementary school thinking maybe I was unable to see what was really going on. I, like many other Black people in my generation, was the only Black kid in my class. I think the first time I actually had class with another Black kid was when I was in 5th grade. I'd need to go back and look at my class pictures to be sure, but for sure there were never, like, 6 or 7 of us in one class. So anyway, in elementary school, right around the same time I was told that colored people couldn't swim, I remember wondering whether I saw the same stuff the White kids saw. I seriously remember wondering whether I just THOUGHT I was sitting quietly while in reality I was running around going crazy and being disruptive. I don't really know why I wondered that. I'd picked up on some kinds of cues in pop culture and stuff, I guess, but I really did think that there was a chance that the White kids were just being polite not to react to me if I was jumping on their desks and throwing stuff without being able to see it myself.

In elementary school, I was in the gifted program. I've never been any good at math or science, but I was a really creative kid who loved history and telling stories. In third grade, the gifted program focused on the middle ages. I was in heaven. I loved learning about knights and castles and all that stuff. We had a group project to do sometime that year, where we had to give a short speech about something we'd learned during the year. All of the groups broke off to divvy up the work when my teacher came over to my group. Wouldn't it be "easier" and more fun for me if my group did our presentation as a rap? I'm eight years old. I have no history writing any kind of music, much less a full 3 or 4 minutes of rap verses for me and my teammates. But, I tried. The other kids just expected it to be natural for me. They looked at me like, "What do you mean you don't know how to rap?" We ended up just doing it as a regular presentation like everybody else, and afterward my teacher came up to me and said, "I thought you guys were going to rap? I was looking forward to MC Brian." Again, she didn't know that she was making a racially-insensitive statement. Why would she? It's not like she'd had deep conversation about how Black people feel about their Blackness, or the way Black people internalized the way White people feel about our Blackness.

From elementary school through middle school, I can't remember how many times the White kids asked if they could touch my hair. I'm not kidding when I say it happened pretty much once a week at least. At first, it didn't bother me. But eventually I felt like an exhibit in a petting zoo. And I didn't have the vocabulary to explain to them that it was really weird that they kept asking to touch my hair all the time. See, I was a pretty shy kid. I was the only Black one, I was overweight, and I'd moved three times before I turned 10. So, rather than tell the White kids that no, they couldn't rummage through my hair, I just said yes and sat there quietly while they marveled at how my hair felt.

My least favorite time of the year, every year, was February. Black History Month. Being the only Black kid in the class, I was the designated reader for the entire month. When it came time to read from our history books about slavery and the Triangle Trade Route, I was always the one who was chosen to read. When it came time to read about Jim Crow, it was my turn. George Washington Carver and the peanut? That sounds like a job for Brian. Booker T. Washington? Harriet Tubman? Surely Brian is the perfect choice for those passages. All the

while, I felt the eyes of my fellow students on me. Again, I was already a shy kid. So, having an entire classroom of White kids stare at me while I explained what lynching and Black Codes were was pretty mortifying.

Middle school is awkward for almost everybody. But when you're one of a handful of Black kids in a sea of judgmental, painfully self-conscious White kids, that awkwardness is magnified. I can remember being in 7th grade when a couple of girls who were always way too cool to talk to me ran up in the hallway and told me they had a girl for me to meet. Being that I was 12 or 13, I asked what she looked like. "You're really going to like her," they said. I met her near the end of the day. She was morbidly obese and about three shades darker than me. The popular girls, of course, decided that since we were both Black and overweight, we were a match made in heaven. At this point, I'm pretty sure they were aware that they were being jerks. The ignorance of childhood had mostly fallen away by that point. But they were popular, I was a nerd, and the girl they thought was perfect for me was new in school. I'm sure they told her they had a great guy for her too. We just stood there, both aware that we were the butt of their joke and aware that we didn't have the social cache to actually do anything about it.

In 8th grade, I went to a friend's house to jump on his trampoline. I didn't know the kid all that well, but we had some mutual friends and at that age, if a kid has a trampoline, you're going to jump on that trampoline. He had a couple of neighbors who were probably 6 or 7 year old girls. We're jumping on the trampoline and the girls come out of their house and come over into his yard. Within about 5 minutes, they were laughing while saying "Get off our property, Black boy." They were little, and they were laughing, so I don't think they knew how ugly they were being. After all, they'd probably never had a Black kid in their one or two elementary school classes. But they'd clearly heard that phrase somewhere else before. I wasn't even on their property; I was next door. But it's fair to assume that at some point, someone in their house had said "Get off my property, Black boy."

In high school, I was around more Black kids. Still not a lot, but more than zero, so that was nice. When I was fifteen, I got my first "real" girlfriend. I'd asked some girls out before, and some of them said yes, but when you're 13 or 14 years old, what does "going out" even mean? So, my first "real" girlfriend was White. After all, I was living in an overwhelmingly White community and it's not like I was a heartthrob, so I was in no position to tell a girl who liked me that I was only interested in dating a Black girl. I might've never had a girlfriend if that was the line I drew. We were a good couple. We got along well and had similar interests and stuff. Basically, what you'd like to have as a high school sophomore. Her parents were divorced, but her mom and stepdad liked me. Then, her biological father found out I was Black. A week later, she called me crying and said we had to break up. Her dad didn't support her dating a Black person. So, my first heartbreak came as a direct result of racism.

When I was going through driver's ed, my behind the wheel instructor was a football coach at one of the other Naperville high schools. He asked what kind of car I wanted one time, and I told him I was gonna get my dad's Dodge Intrepid, but that I really liked my brother's Mazda. He looked at me like I was nuts and said he figured I'd want an Impala so I could put some hydraulics on it and "hit dem switchezzzzz." When we got back to my house at the end of my last behind the wheel session, he shook my hand and said it was a pleasure teaching me how to drive. Then, he said, "You're a Black kid, but you're pretty cool, you know? Like, you're not like one of THOSE Black people, you know?"

In high school, I played football. There was a kid on the football team who I'd been friends with since middle school. Not, like, best friends or anything, but we ran in similar circles and we were certainly friendly with each other. When we were 16 or 17, he started referring to me as "The Whitest Black guy." It really pissed me off. He knew it pissed me off. I guess because I used proper grammar, wore clothes that fit, and listened to metal in addition to hip hop, it made me "White." Turns out, to be "authentically Black" means being a caricature of what a Black person should be, according to this suburban White kid. This is another case of me lacking the vocabulary at the time to express how that made me feel, but it's pretty messed up. This kid (we're currently Facebook friends, so I hope he reads this and knows who I'm talking about) identified as Italian-American. I didn't call him "The most Anglo Italian guy" because he didn't bring home-made ravioli to school for lunch everyday and play an accordion while growing a mustache.

I got pulled over a lot in high school. Like, a lot a lot. By this point, I was no longer driving the Dodge. I had a Mazda of my own. It was flashy and loud, but this was 2002 and everybody with a Japanese car was doing a Vin Diesel impression, so it's not like mine stood out that much more than anyone else's. I spent a ton of money on my car and was especially aware of its appearance. You can understand, then, why it was weird that I was routinely pulled over for a busted taillight. After all, that's the kind of thing I would've noticed and gotten fixed, especially if that taillight tended to burn out once a week or so. My parents had told me how to act when pulled over by the police, so of course I was all "Yes sir, no sir" every time it happened. That didn't stop them from asking me to step out of the car so they could pat me down or search for drugs, though. I didn't have a drop of alcohol until I was 21, but by that point I was an expert at breathalyzers and field sobriety tests. On occasion, the officer was polite. But usually, they walked up with their hand on their gun and talked to me like I'd been found guilty of a grisly homicide earlier in the day. A handful of times, they'd tell me to turn off the car, drop the keys out the window, and keep my hands outside the vehicle before even approaching.

I went to the University of Iowa, which is a very White campus in a very White state. It's funny, because most of the people I met there who came from small-town Iowa were really excited to finally meet a Black person. And it wasn't like they wanted me to be a mascot; they genuinely wanted a Black friend so they could learn about Black people and stuff. It was nice. On the other hand, if I was in a bar and talking to a girl they didn't think I should be talking to, or in their drunken state they bumped into sober me, you'd be surprised to see how quickly some of these guys will call a complete stranger a nigger.

Once, when I came home from college, I was pulled over less than a block from my parents' house. It was late, probably about midnight or so, but I hadn't been drinking and it was winter so I wasn't speeding because it had snowed that day. The officer stepped out of his car with his gun drawn. He told me to drop the keys out the window, then exit the car with my hands up and step back toward him. I knew he was wrong, but I wasn't about to be shot to death down the street from my parents' house because my failure to immediately comply was interpreted as me plotting to murder that officer. So yeah, I stepped out and backed up toward the officer. He hand cuffed me and refused to tell me why I had been pulled over, or why I had been asked to exit my vehicle. Only when I was sitting in the back of the police car did he tell me that there had been reports of gang activity in the area and that a car fitting my car's description with a driver fitting my description had recently been involved in said gang activity. Gang activity. In south Naperville. Committed by a Black male driving a bright blue Mazda MX-6 with a gaudy blue and white interior. Yeah, alright. He was very short in asking me what I was doing in the neighborhood so late at night. I explained that my parents lived at that house with the glass backboard over there. He didn't believe me. He took me back out of the car and put me face down on the hood of the police car to frisk me. I'd already been searched once before he put me in the car. Then, he spent about 15 minutes searching my car while I stood hand cuffed in the cold. My ID had my parents' address on it, but he still didn't think I lived there. I could tell he wanted to accuse me of having a fake ID. About a half hour after being pulled over, when he found nothing on me, nothing in my car, and nothing on my record, he reluctantly let me go. He didn't even say sorry, or explain that it was his mistake; he must've been looking for another Black man in a bright blue Mazda MX-6 who was a gang leader in south Naperville. He sat in the street until I drove to my parents' house, opened the garage door, drove inside, and then closed the garage door.

Back at Iowa, things were pretty cool. Yeah, the occasional frat boy would call me a nigger when he was mad at me at the bar, but I had a lot of good friends and it's not like nobody had ever called me that before or anything. I was dating a girl when I went to college, and we broke up right before my sophomore year. She made sure to tell me she would NEVER date someone outside of her race again when we broke up. As though A) I was the representative of all Black people, and B) I was going to have to explain to all Black men why she was unwilling to date them in the future.

One summer when I was back from college, I had an argument with a good friend of mine. When I say "good friend," I mean that this is a guy I knew since middle school. Our dads used to work together. I can't count how many times I had spent the night at his parents' house. But we had an argument. The kind of argument most friends have at one point or another. This time, he decided to get really, really racial about it. He started off by

telling me I should be ashamed of my complexion (he later claimed that he meant I had bad skin; only I'd only had like two pimples in my entire life). Then, he said I belong in the ghetto, not Naperville. In the end, he looked me dead in the face and called me a nigger. Again, this was one of my closest friends. Since then, I've completely cut him out of my life. But, it fits with the experiences that I've had too many times; people can be totally cool for years and years but suddenly decide that they need to be super racist because they want to hurt you. They'll say they're sorry, they'll explain how you misinterpreted what they said, but the fact is, they reach for racism because they think it'll emotionally and psychologically destroy you, and that's what they want to do at that moment.

During my senior year, I went to a game at Kinnick stadium. I'd been to every home game since my first week at college and a handful of away games too. I'd only started drinking about 5 months before that, but my band had a show the night before and my bandmates were leaving town that morning, so I didn't get hammered during tailgating. I didn't want them to call me for directions and have me be unable to help. We were waiting in line to get into the game; I was with probably 4 or 5 of my friends. While standing in line, a much drunker guy lost his balance and fell into me and one of my friends. I caught him and helped him back up, and he was pretty oblivious to his surroundings. An officer inside the gate saw what happened and called me out of the line when I got inside the gate. He told me that he saw me try to fight that guy in line and said I was too drunk to enter the stadium. He told me I could either go home or go to jail. I told him I had no problem going home, but because there were only two more home games left I wanted to know what I had done to draw such negative attention to myself. Plus, it was pretty cold anyway. He got about an inch from my face and yelled, "GO HOME NOW OR GO TO JAIL." I turned to leave and he hand cuffed me. I wound up watching Iowa vs Northwestern 2006 from the drunk tank inside Kinnick Stadium. Everyone else in there was either screaming, puking, or passed out. The guy who fell into me was allowed to go into the game. The charges against me were dropped when the lady who kept an eye on the drunk tank spoke on my behalf when I had to go see the judge.

In 2012, I went to watch the Iowa game at John Barleycorn on Clark Street in Chicago. We watched almost every game there. I had gotten some t-shirts printed up and went to my car to get them so I could give them to my friends. While coming back, I saw a Michigan fan absolutely beating the hell out of a Nebraska fan (they were both White). I ran up into the fight (I was admittedly drunk this time) and pulled the Michigan fan off the Nebraska fan. Dude's face was all bloody and messed up. The police were on the scene about 15 seconds later. Michigan and Nebraska both got to go home to "cool off," but I wound up hand cuffed and sitting on the curb. There were at least a dozen witnesses there who tried to tell the officer that I was just trying to break up the fight, and that Michigan should've been arrested for assault. One of Nebraska's female friends even told the officer that I might've saved his life (probably an exaggeration, but it's what was said). After about 15 minutes, the officer removed the hand cuffs and let me go. He said he got a call that there was a big fight breaking out, but otherwise I'd be going to jail that night. He said if he ever saw me on Clark Street again, we'd have a problem.

I could go on and on and on about this. I could tell you about the guy who wanted to buy his guitar from someone who "actually knew what a guitar was" when I worked at guitar center. At that point, I had a Gibson Les Paul at my house and an Ibanez acoustic, plus a Warwick fretless bass. I could tell you about the coworker who thought it was funny to adopt a stereotypical Black accent to apologize that we weren't going to have fried chicken and cornbread at our company Christmas party. I could tell you about the time I gave my floor mate a haircut freshman year and he "thanked" me by saying he'd let a negro cut his hair any day of the week. I could tell you about leaving a bar heartbroken and fighting tears when the Trayvon Martin verdict came out only to see a couple middle-aged White guys high-fiving and saying he "got what he deserved" right outside. These are only a handful of the experiences I've had in my 31 years.

I've never had a Black boss. I played football from middle school through senior year of high school and only had one Black coach in that whole time. Not just head coaches, I'm talking about assistants and position coaches. I've had two Black teachers in my entire life. One was for my Harlem Renaissance class, and one was for my sign language class. I've never been to a Black doctor, or a Black dentist. I've never been pulled over by a Black police officer. What I'm trying to explain is that, in 31 years, I've seen three Black people in a position of authority. Think about what that does to the psyche of a growing young man. I remember being excited just a few years ago

when we started to see Black people in commercials without there being gospel or hip hop music in the background (remember that McDonald's commercial where the little kid was pop-locking with the chicken McNuggets?).

Before you say it, I don't want to hear that you're "sorry I had these experiences." Because it's not just me. It's not like I'm some kind of magnet for all of the racists in America and I'm some weird anomaly. This is what it means to be Black in America. I appreciate that you're sorry for me, but I'm not seeking your sorrow. I'm seeking your understanding. I just want you to understand that this is real. We're not exaggerating it, and we're not making it up. White people often say that we make everything about race. That's because, for us, damn near everything IS about race. It's always been that way. When I have a great phone interview, but go for my in-person interview only to be told that the position has been filled, how am I supposed to know that's not just because they expected a White Iowa graduate to show up for the interview? When I have an especially-attentive employee keep checking in with me at the mall, how am I supposed to know they're shooting for employee of the month, not watching me to make sure I'm not stealing? What do you think it's like when someone says "You don't sound Black at all" when I have a phone conversation with them and then meet them in person? What do you think it's like seeing Confederate flags on cars and flag poles in northern states, only to have someone tell me I'm being too sensitive for not liking it?

When we say "Black Lives Matter," understand what that actually means. We aren't saying that ONLY Black lives matter. We're saying "Black lives matter TOO." For the entirety of the history of this country, Black lives have not mattered. At a minimum, they haven't mattered nearly as much as White lives. If a Black person kills another Black person, and we have it on tape, the killer goes to jail. If a White police officer kills a Black person and we have it on tape, the entire judicial system steps up to make sure that officer doesn't go to jail. It doesn't matter whether the Black person was holding a toy gun in a Walmart, or whether the Black person was a 12-year-old kid playing with a BB gun in an empty park. The police union steps up to say the officer was fearing for his life, just worried about trying to make it home that night. IF a grand jury is convened, the prosecutor will present a purposely-weak case to make sure no indictment is reached. IF, by some miracle, an indictment is handed down, no jury is actually going to convict that officer. That's what we mean when we say Black Lives Matter. I can only speak for myself, but I have no reason to believe that the officers in Minnesota or Baton Rouge will ever see the inside of a jail cell. If we can have video evidence that an officer pulled up, jumped out of his car, shot a 12-year-old to death less than 2 seconds after arriving on the scene, administered no first aid, tackled and hand cuffed the boy's sister when she arrived on the scene, and then falsified a police report to say that the boy pointed a gun at him and that he only shot when the boy refused several orders to drop his weapon and STILL not get an indictment, why should we think that an officer who shoots a Black man who had a gun in his pocket, or a Black man who had a concealed weapon on him, will face a trial? If a White man sees a 14-year-old Black boy in his neighborhood, follows him in his car, ignores orders not to engage him, then gets into a fight with him and shoots him in the chest and is found not guilty, why should we expect ANYBODY to go to jail for killing us? It's just not realistic. It's a fairy tale. All you have to do is say you were afraid, and you get a book deal and a job as a commentator on FOX News every time this kind of thing happens again.

That is why Black people are in such pain right now. The deaths are bad enough. But having the feeling that nobody will ever actually be held accountable for the deaths is so much worse. And then watching as the police union, the media, and conservative politicians team up to imagine scenarios where the officer did nothing wrong, and then tell those of us who are in pain that our pain is wrong, unjustified, and all in our heads just serves to twist the knife.

If you read all this, I really, really want to say thank you. I know it was a lot to get through. But this is real. This is me. This is what my life is and has been. And I'm not alone.