

# Playing It Safe

by Nelson Ogbuagu

I remember walking into Aldi grocery stores, back when my pops still cut my hair in a bowl shape with no line-up, and when I'd wake up for elementary school to my outfit for the day dangling at the foot of mom's bed. Moms would stop me right before we stepped on the dusty gray sensor pad that opened those automatic doors, and clean me up like Dayana Davila from 4th period pre-algebra was waiting for me behind the glass. She brushed my hair with the soft bristled brush she kept in her over-sized purse. She would pull my pants way up to my nipples, exposing my ashy calves and mix-matched socks, and instruct me not to touch anything. If my shirt was too baggy, which it always was, she'd tuck it into whatever bottoms I had on, and never let me rock baseball caps while inside. On the days that I'd rest my hands in my pocket in order to escape the cool breeze of the frozen veggie section, she'd yank my arms to my side, tell me never to do that again, and ask me why I loved bringing so much extra attention to myself. It took me a bit of time to truly understand the *extra* part. I mean, it didn't hurt to look your best whether you're at an Aldi or the alter, but even then, I couldn't look inside or at myself to see what it was that made me such an easy target for the store clerks that would pat me down in the middle of the cashier's check-out line. And when I did learn that my darker skin was probable cause for suspicion, I began to perceive my existence in the same way that white America did, and ran from it.

Growing up in Uptown, North Chicago, but going to a selective enrollment school with primarily white kids made it seem pretty simple to distance myself from my melanin. I learned early on that it was possible to "look and sound white," from what I wore and how I spoke. I got pretty good at playing pretend too. I was the fortunate one of the handful of black kids to have been selected for such a unique place within the high school teenage food chain. I was the guy black enough to attract white kids, but white enough to attract white kids. I wore small Abercrombie & Fitch t-shirts even though I was a size medium that I got on sale at the thrift mall in my area, but would "accidentally" leave the tag on sometimes so that the guys would see the original \$59.99 price tag and think I had it like that. I wore Levi's jeans so tight that my mom would walk in some mornings and ask me if the pants belonged to me or one of my three younger sisters. They loved me because I had "swag" and didn't use the word "finna," but could also Crank Dat Soulja Boy with the best of em'. Their favorite part of our friendship was probably the fact that they could tell me that Mr. Parker was their "N-Word" because he let them retake their history final, without worrying that I'd swing at them. Eventually, I had convinced enough people that I was only black by default, and soon became known as an "Oreo" around the school. Black city boy on the outside. White suburban hipster kid on the inside.

Looking back, I can only imagine how I should've responded. I should've told them that my blackness isn't comprised solely of physical characteristics. That it stems from a history of abuse and subjugation, but power and resilience. That it's founded on creativity and love and is a culture as much as it's an identity. That it's more than music and baggy clothing. That it's a

conglomerate of shared experiences of oppression, but shared stories of perseverance coupled with beautifully unique shades of melanin. That to trivialize that by assuming that my manner of speech, my posture, and my intelligence was achieved in spite of my blackness, and not because of it, is prejudice, racist, and rude as fuck. But there I was, having finally achieved the ultimate hybrid of the human existence. I was the Blade of the American racial divide. Born with the aesthetic that is so sought after by white American pop culture, but void of self-love, cultural pride and acceptance, confidence, and strength. Void of everything that made them hate us. Resent us. Fear us. I was too afraid of what might happen if I chose to embrace any of that, so when they called me an Oreo, I'd wink and say "Yea, your girl's favorite cookie."

I was 17 when I had my first run-in with a Chicago Police Officer following my transcendence of racial limitations. I was working as a preschool teacher's aid in the neighborhood child care program in Uptown that I grew up in while my parents worked to support me and my 4 siblings. It was a bright and warm summer day, so I decided to take the 3-5 year old posse on a trip to the park to let out some steam before mac, ham, and cheese at noon. We line the kids up based on behavior for some reason. The best-behaved got to be the line-leader, and the next best, who happened to be the worst behaved that day, was the caboose of the train; they took care of the First-Aid satchel and got to hold the teacher's hand. Samuel was the caboose that day.

He and I never quite got along. It was as though he could see the game of charades I was playing, and resented me for it. He was a five year old, shamelessly black first generation child. His thick Nigerian accent lay heavy on his tongue and his short sleeve shirts still sat below his elbows, the way mine used to. Samuel received caboose duty, even though he thought it was a good idea to call a kid out during playtime in the playhouse because she wanted to have two moms instead of a mom and a dad. Coming from a similar Nigerian background as the kid, I could only imagine the religiously charged homophobic discourse he sat through at home or during church that left such a terrible mark on his impressionable mind. Of course, it wouldn't be until I got to college that I would start the process of cleansing my head of the same thoughts. But thanks to our sensitivity training prior to the internship start date, I knew the right thing to do was try and reason with Samuel that maybe those family dynamics were more flexible than he gives them credit for. He was as stubborn as I was when I was five. All he did was whine and try and convince me that the tight pink polo I had on was meant for girls. I was inclined to agree, but it was a direct recommendation from pretty boy Daniel Benkowski from 5th period pre-calculus, so there was nothing left to argue.

We get to the park about an hour before lunch time. After an hour of playing monster, running around slides caked orange with rust, climbing monkey bars tall enough for the kids to pretend woodchips were lava, and complaining about how hard life was going to get when they hit kindergarten, we decide to bounce. I collect the kids and we make our way back to the daycare center for lunch.

Samuel decided to wait until we got back to remember that he forgot the First-Aid satchel on a bench in the park.

I made my way back to the park and retrieved the satchel. I picked it up and slung it around my back as I left out of the gate. Just as I had stepped out I noticed a police truck slow

down to a halt in the middle of the street. The tinted car windows slowly rolled down as I started my path down the sidewalk, revealing a hefty white police officer in the driver's seat. He had a heavy 5 o'clock shadow and his dirty blonde hair was thinning on all sides. The baby blue short-sleeve button up that all CPD officers wore matched his eyes, which I noticed after he took off his black sunglasses to check me out. His glasses were the kind that had the strings attached so that they'd dangle at this thick neck. He leaned towards the open window, with his arm rested on the neck of the passenger's seat, the way people's arms do when they're about to back-up into a driveway or garage, or catcall an unsuspecting female on her way home after a long day of being harassed by her manager during her 9 to 5.

"Hey!" The police officer declared from the comfort of his suede throne. I turned toward the park, scanning the area in hopes of catching the guy this cop was about to bust before I went back to work. Not seeing anyone, I kept walking, turning my head towards the path in front of me and began thinking of what story I'd read my kids after lunch.

"You think you're fucking funny?"

I froze in the middle of my stride, only turning my head to meet the gaze of the officer, watching him scan every inch of my person. I imagine this is what my brother felt like the first time he had a run in with the police. Of course, my brother rolled with a bunch of black boys who smoked cigarettes that could of course be misinterpreted for weed or crack cocaine down the dark streets of southern Chicago.

"Me?" I asked, turning the rest of my body towards the truck.

"No shit, boy." He said. He got angrier as he kept talking. "What do you think you're doing in that park?"

I didn't respond immediately. Instead, I ran through every scenario that I could think of at that moment that could potentially explain what I did to piss the cop off like that. I reimagined what my actions were the moment I pulled up to the park: *So, I walked in the park, then I got the satchel, then I left.*

*Fuck, I must be forgetting something.*

A combination of fear and ignorance clouded my perspective of the situation for what it really was. In my eyes, there was no reason for any hostility. My outfit was picked by people that looked like him. The pink polo from H&M, tucked into the khaki shorts cuffed at the bottom that sat above your knees from H&M, with the no-name brand boat shoes from H&M. No socks. The Standard American English with which I spoke was considered appropriate by those that looked like him. My friends looked liked him. By most accounts "I might as well be" one of them.

"If you don't start talking, I swear to god."

"So sorry, sir." I said abruptly, my voice two octaves higher than normal. I learned to raise my naturally baritone voice from my mother. Whenever my mother speaks to white people, her accent magically disappears, and her vocal tone hits falsetto levels.

"I was with my kids and the caboose--"

"What kids?" He yelled. "Don't fucking lie to me boy!"

"My preschool students--Samuel left the ba--"

"Why do you have your hat cocked like that?" he asked me. "Who are you selling to in a kid's park?"

I'm standing before the cop, finding it harder to breathe as the situation escalates. Air I meant to exhale starts to form into a growing ball of anxiety bouncing away in the back of my throat. The fear partially came from the situation: the random hostility, the lack of power and agency, how this otherwise unassuming cop had the power to dictate whether I'd be the one to share this incident, or if some news reporter trying to catch his big break would do the honors instead. The fear also came from the fact that the officer criticized an article of clothing as though I just threw this shit on. An article that I picked out as part of the ensemble meant to ward off situations like this one. An ensemble meant to reassure white people that I was no threat to them, their children, or their public parks. The thought that years of molding myself to meet a white standard, just for that exhausting attempt at assimilation to accumulate in a police confrontation in the middle of a children's park, during my shift as a preschool teacher's aid, was overwhelming. I tried to explain, calmly and articulately, that I was not selling anything and that my hat was, in fact, not cocked. It sat firmly atop my head, the brim facing upward towards the sky, to expose my hair. Carol Plath, during Chemistry, adjusted it in this way, saying that the way I originally wore it, with the brim over my forehead, made me look ghetto.

"So you're calling me a fucking liar?"

I watched his hand leave the steering wheel and grip the door handle. The squeaking of the handle as he pulled it towards him to unlock the door made my heart race.

"It's always something with you people." He said as he stepped out of the vehicle.

I frantically began trying to explain to him why I was there. In a slurred mush of hurriedly spoken words and waving hands I tried to tell him that I was at the park on a day trip, but had to go back alone to get the First-Aid kit from the park that Samuel left. I watched hatred swell up in his face, reddening his already puffy cheeks. He spoke over me for the majority of my monologue, already consumed by the perception of my guilt.

"Look!" I yelled.

In the middle of my explanation, I reached to retrieve the satchel that I slung behind me earlier. My hand had barely gripped the bag when the voice of the officer shot into my ears.

"Hey!" The officer yelled, backing up. "Don't fucking move!"

His hand was already gripping the glock pistol at his waist. His chubby fingers curled the strap, his hairy knuckles facing towards me. Shoulders squared. Legs spread. His pointer finger tickling the tip of the clasp that sheathed his rifle. Perfect form.

I wanted to run, but my thoughts wouldn't have reached my legs fast enough. I could almost see his hands shaking with angst, waiting for me to make the move that would give him the clearance to shoot.

Meanwhile, the First-Aid satchel rested on my side, in plain sight for the officer, whenever he decided to see it.

My mind was static. White noise and blank thoughts with no weight or significance blurred together in my head. My eyes were focused on the piece at his hip. Any words meant to beg were as trapped behind my throat as my intentions were behind my skin.

So I waited.

It felt like a lifetime before his gaze left my face, and peered down to the First-Aid man-purse dangling at my hip. After several moments, his hands relaxed, and his posture straightened.

He made his way back to his car, shaking his head and scratching the scruff of his beard as though he wondered if he made the right decision. He sat back in his car, still parked in the middle of the street, and stared at me with the same gaze from the early moments of our conversation.

"What's that wristband say?" He asked.

"GC Pride, sir."

"What's GC?" He yelled. "What gang is that?"

My mother used to tell me that difference between the black man that became a statistician and the one that became a statistic was education. According to her, and every other adult with any interest in my academic career, going to college meant you were safe from shit like this going down. I received my acceptance into Glengrove College earlier that month. I had just returned from a suspension after failing my AP environmental science course for unwittingly plagiarizing the final paper. The small white college decision envelopes were piling up in the bin of mail in front of the computer in the living room:

*Dear Nathan,*

*The Administrators Committee has carefully reviewed your application to such and such college. After much consideration, we regret to inform you that...*

*And so on.*

When I returned home, my mother showed me the large package with the big scarlet floral leaf. The top of it was perforated already, because at 18 your parents still have full access to your mail.

I stared at the hefty envelope for a while, and then at the contents sprawled across the floor that my mom had been examining while I was in my 8th period art class at school, before breaking down into her arms. With my mom out of a job, and my father relocating to Wisconsin for a new one, it felt like a hope that I had long abandoned was tucked away inside that envelope. I sat and cried into my mother shoulders, soaking her sleeves in tears and mucus.

"GC stands for Glengrove College, Sir." I told the officer.

"Oh right, like you're going to college."

I watched as the officer began to adjust himself behind the wheel, the wheels of the truck slowly started rolling down the street. But before speeding off, the officer left me with one last piece of wisdom:

"Show some more fucking respect."

It has been four years since this incident. And four years of incidents like it. Four more years of white store clerks at the Tony's across from the children's hospital up west who always happen to be restocking fruit loops in the aisle that I'm deciding between Coco Puffs and Corn Pops. Four more years of watching young boys who look like me dying at the hands of officers that looked like the one I met those years ago. And four years of understanding that there's no amount of clothing or class that can color me any differently of a shade than the one passed down to me from the many generations before.

But with all of that, I still find myself in a place of privilege that makes me afraid of commenting on issues of race and race performance. I still feel the sting of shame stemming from the hatred of myself those years ago, and the much fewer but familiar moments of self-

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resentment that I feel today. And I'm still uncertain about the place that my story fits in with the conversations of black people in white America. All I know for certain is that if anyone ever tries to call me an Oreo again, I swear to god.

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