

# *My First Police Stop*

MY FIRST CAR WAS A 1994 NISSAN MAXIMA THAT I got the summer before my senior year of high school. It was an odd shade of brown, a fading gold stripe encased the body, and it had a loud muffler. Still, it was mine, and growing up without a lot of money makes you cherish what is yours. Shortly after I drove it off the lot, I started to have an issue with the car. The car's alarm would be triggered by me unlocking the driver's side door with the key. An electrical problem that, I was told, would cost almost as much as I paid for the car to fix. This resulted in two solutions: either I unlocked the door and quickly started the car to silence the incessant combination of loud horn and flashing lights, or I would have to unlock the passenger door, which did not trigger the alarm, and climb across it. It was a typical high school car, faulty and deeply loved.

In early September of 2001, after a few weeks of locking myself in my dorm room in between soccer practices and a rigorous new class schedule, my roommate dragged me to my first college party. Admittedly, I wasn't much of a hard-partying person in high school, but I briefly celebrated the idea of reinvention, despite the fact that my college, Capital University, was only a few miles away from my father's home. I would still, largely, be within walls with people who didn't know anything about me. People I'd be spending at least a few years with, and a blank slate to rebuild. The infant stages of college always seemed to be thrilling in this way: after years of observing who you could have been in high school, you can step into it, in front of people who don't know any different.

After a few hours inside, mostly clinging to the safety of a wall, I skipped out of the party, eager to escape a house imprisoned by a thick cloud of body heat and drink in the night air. I rushed to my car and put the key into my driver's side door. Before turning it, I looked around the street where I parked. The towering and expensive homes, the paved sidewalks, the darkness and silence. I opted for what I was sure my father would say was the smarter choice: I unlocked my passenger side door, clumsily climbed across the seats, and started my car. As I put it in drive and began to accelerate, I first saw the police car's lights.

I spend a lot of time trying to pinpoint exactly how fear is learned. Rather, how we decide that fear is a necessary animal that grows out of our relentless expectation to survive at all costs, and how I have been afraid and been feared at the same time. When I reflect, I think the fact that I lived for 17 years without a direct fear of the police makes me lucky. I knew of the warnings from my father: *don't go on a run at night. Don't reach into your pockets too quickly. Be polite in front of them.*

Growing up in the neighborhood I did, police were often present, and yet I never learned to be afraid. Police would drive slow past the basketball courts in summer, scanning the games and the people watching. They would follow my friends and I around corner stores, eyeing our hands and the items in them. I had seen them make life difficult for people in my neighborhood who were not me, and yet I never learned to be afraid. Until the early fall of 2001.

Bexley, Ohio, sits on Columbus's east side. A small and flourishing mostly white suburb that centers on Capital University, it is sandwiched by two significantly poorer, mostly black neighborhoods, one of them being where I grew up. This has always created an interesting tension within the city, especially as Bexley has expanded on each side in recent years, pushing the poor on its borders further toward the margins. For years, there has been an odd tug-of-war happening between the residents

of Bexley, between their fears and their progressive-leaning stances. For example, the person who punches a Democratic ticket on Election Day might also clutch her purse tighter when walking past a black person on the street. Because Bexley is a sheltered suburb that is sandwiched between two poor, mostly black neighborhoods, the residents have a proximity to blackness that is rooted primarily in a vision of monolithic poverty. This breeds sympathy, for the conditions, but not much interest in actually engaging the people. In 2001, despite black people pushing against its borders, Bexley remained 90 percent white.

It wasn't always like this. The east side of Columbus was once a place for young black people to come and flourish. A small-scale Harlem, in some ways: there were nightclubs teeming with jazz players, theaters, block parties, horse races, and a good way for most hard-working folks to make a living. Livingston Avenue and the King-Lincoln Bronzeville district were the city's cultural hubs up until the early 1950s. Columbus, as most cities do, chose construction and convenience over the lives of its black residents, setting in motion a project to construct the sprawling freeway of Interstate 70, and its sibling, Interstate 670. This demolished much of those communities and pushed the people in them deeper into the southern parts of the city, away from the downtown area, and out of the city's once-thriving center. The clubs and theaters were replaced with bigger houses to lure in more wealthy, white residents who would find themselves working in the new and expanded downtown, or people moving in to have access to the freeway. The black residents who could stay suffered, losing many of the work opportunities they once had in all of their old haunts, but also too prideful to move homes. This was their neighborhood, after all. That is how Bexley found itself both at the center of two black neighborhoods, but also built to ignore them.

In 2001, Capital University recruited me to play soccer. They were one of a small handful of schools to do so, as I was a

very capable high school soccer player who also didn't have the height to play the position that my skill set most aligned with. Soccer was, admittedly, an interesting choice for me, given my background. Most of the young black kids in my neighborhood played basketball—a sport I also played, though not nearly as well. I stood out on most soccer fields. I was the only black player on my select team, even though the team had a black coach—a detail my father scouted out during the team selection process. I didn't see myself as choosing soccer to be different from my peers, at least not initially. I had a natural skill set that translated well to the sport: a blend of speed and instincts that allowed for a versatility of position, and the coordination and balance to tie every skill together. At 17, with an offer from a college a few miles from my father's house, I didn't consider the idea of existing as black in a place that historically worked to erase all signs of blackness from their communities. Bexley was the suburb down the street. A place where the grass was greener. In the late summer of that year, I stepped on the field as the first American-born player of color in the Capital University soccer program's history.

When I hear people talk about “the right things to do” to make sure that police don't kill you, I imagine that I have learned to face police differently than they have. When you are asked to step out of a car that you own, and your body no longer belongs to you, but instead belongs to the lights drowning it, first one and then another, a harsh reality exists. There are two sides of a night that you can end up on: one where you get to see the sunrise again, and one where you do not. You don't exactly consider this in the moment, which I think is important to point out. When demands and questions are being leveled at you, particularly at a high volume, particularly with skepticism in their tone and a light in your eyes, it is easy to fall into an idea of wanting to prove yourself. To reach for anything that might show that

you are a whole person and worthy of staying that way. I recall becoming close with fear, with the instinct to stay alive.

That particular night, police officers, first two, and then three more, responded to a call of suspicious behavior. This is where the story becomes unremarkable to many. I was asked to exit my car before I was asked for ID. When I mentioned that this was my own vehicle, I was silenced, held outside of my vehicle by two officers while others huddled around a squad car. When finally asked to produce ID, I reached in my pocket, remembered that it was in my bookbag that I placed in the trunk, and moved to get it. Upon moving, I was grabbed and forcefully held in the grass. People walked from their homes, and I wondered silently which one of them called the police on me. I thought about my pants, now stained by the grass, and how much they cost me. How much the car cost me. How much it cost me to get here, to this college, out of a neighborhood just five miles away that no one on this block would ever venture to. But I mostly thought about how I perhaps owned nothing. Not even my own hands, pressed behind my back.

I was eventually pulled up after what felt like hours, but must have only been five minutes. My car ransacked, my license and college ID eventually located, as the rest of my bookbag's contents spread across the pavement. After the officer stared at my face and stared at my ID repeatedly, he mumbled, "Interesting name. Sorry for the trouble."

After they left, my belongings still scattered in the street, I sat on a curb and watched my hands shake for an hour. No one left their homes to help me or ask if I was okay. No one from the party witnessed the incident. None of the people I wanted to make myself new for witnessed this undoing of pride. It felt, of course, like I didn't belong. Like I was a trespasser, waiting to find my way back to another home.

I don't remember what I felt for the police that night being hatred, or at least not what I would define as hatred. Even today,

in being critical of the institution of police and systems of policing, I feel no hatred toward the men and women themselves. I have had many interactions with police since 2001, some better, and a few just as bad. In 2008, I was detained in a store for hours, again without a simple ID check, because I "matched the description" of a shoplifter who I looked nothing like. In 2014, I was pulled over in Pennsylvania for not following a law I wasn't aware of. The officer who pulled me over politely explained the law, bantered warmly with me a bit about Ohio, where I was heading, and let me off without a ticket. Like everyone, my interactions with the police exist on a wide spectrum. Unlike everyone, my expectations for interactions with the police only exist on one part of that spectrum: I expect to fear and be feared. But, I have survived every interaction. The difference now is that when I see the news of another unarmed death, a boy who didn't react to orders fast enough, or a man who reacted too quickly, I know how this can happen. I have entered that space and come out through the other side unscathed, but with a new layer of anger, a new layer of fear. The fact that I was afforded survival once used to make this type of death remarkable. Over the years, I find it to be less and less. With each body, I wonder how their stories began. If they began something like mine.