

“December’s Awakening”

By Richie Kotoh

I could feel the steady blast of the cold, 28 degrees December air hitting my face, and my fingers were practically numb from the constant frigid December air hitting my body. I could see the steady fall of snowflakes dancing on top of police squad cars as their red and blue flashing lights illuminated the night sky. My heart and mind were both racing simultaneously. I whispered to myself under my breath, “how did I even get in this situation?” As more and more police officers began to pull up, a cold shiver rushed down my spine and goosebumps started to form on my arms and legs. I saw the long line of my friends sprawled out across the sidewalk. As I looked down the line all I could see were the red matching Santa hats we were wearing that night from the Christmas party we attended.

Three officers began to leave their squad cars and approach us on the sidewalk. I took one more glance at my friends before the cops addressed us, and I could see the fear in their eyes as if they just had run through a haunted house. The officer that spoke first and addressed us was an average height white male who was bald with a thick mustache.

My eyes immediately darted to his absurdly large mustache, then to his badge name—it read Officer Clark. I could tell by his facial expression walking up to us we had just ruined his peaceful night.

The funny thing is that we didn’t know what we had done or why we were being stopped. Five police cars had just pulled up on 8 teenagers on a below freezing December night for no apparent reason. At least that was what we thought.

Officer Clark had a deep scruffy voice that sounded he had been a smoker for years. He looked down the line of teenagers in Santa hats and asked us where we were coming from. My friend Cameron, who was right next to me at the time, spoke up and said our friend Jake’s Christmas party, which was a couple streets down from here.” The cop then followed up, “yeah

we stopped you guys because we got a call about some kids vandalizing property and breaking mailboxes.”

We all exchanged confused looks with each other. All of us knew that we did no such thing and these accusations were crazy to put on us. We all said as an unorganized collective that we did no such thing and we were simply walking to Wawa (the local convenience store) for some late-night grub and we were going to head back to our friend Jake’s after to sleepover.

Officer Hark wasn’t buying our plea and demanded that we tell him the truth. I thought in my head, “but we are telling the truth...why doesn’t he believe us?” He then pointed his finger in my direction. I looked to my left then my right, pointed to myself, and said “me” in complete confusion. In a serious tone, he said “yes, you step forward please.” Hark then pointed his finger at me again and said “you stand out, in particular, because of what you are wearing.”

So many thoughts began to race in my head. I asked myself “why did he choose me, what motive does he have?” I glanced at my friends once again before stepping forward and realized I was the only black one out of all them.

I started to puzzle the pieces in my head together and I asked myself, “am I being racially profiled right now?” It seemed like the only viable answer. Me and my friends all had the same attire on, a red Santa hat with a white shirt. This was the Christmas party theme that night, so I was wondering how I could possibly even stand out and who even pointed me out?

At that time, I had always seen people of my color being racially profiled for any crime on the news and knew the struggle of my people in this country prior to this situation, but I never really imagined myself being one of those victims. I was scared for my life at this moment.

I asked myself once again: “how could this happen?” This was supposed to be one of the best nights of the year. I started to think back to recount my excitement that morning in school and how it led up to this situation.

I had gotten out of bed that Friday morning with a smile on my face because I knew what the night had in store for me. Classes in school seemed to move as slow as a snail race that day because of the constant anticipation. As each class came and went by, it seemed like my

teachers' voices started to drown out more and more. My mind was only focused on one thing and one thing only that day.

By lunch, Jake's Christmas party was the only thing that my grade was talking about. Me and my close friends were especially excited because this would be one of our very first high school parties as freshman. It was like we were entering a whole new social atmosphere and it seemed like it was only going up from here. My friends and I also felt some sense of maturity because this would be the first party we were attending with upperclassmen. The first couple months of freshman year were not that enjoyable, and the adjusting period from being an 8th grader to now bottom of the food chain again was pretty difficult, but since this party was just around the corner, it seemed like things were finally starting to look up.

After school, I got home and started to prep for what was supposed to be a "great night." I showered, got dressed, did my little cologne routine, and went to tell my mom I was attending a party that night. She asked the usual concerned mother questions: "Whose house is this? Do I know this boy? How old is he? Can I get his mom's number? Can I also have his number?" I then proceeded to respond with "Jake's, no, 15, no, and no." She continued to go down the motherly checklist, as she did any time I go out anywhere, to which I responded with unenthusiastic "yeahs" and "uh huhs."

She did mention one thing though before I left which she had never mentioned. She sat me down and said, "I know it's important to have a good time and have fun with your friends, but it is important you stay alert and vigilant at parties."

I looked at her with a puzzled look. I didn't understand what she meant or what she was talking about. She continued on and said that, "I've noticed that you are one of the only black kids in your friend group. This isn't a bad thing at all. It's actually good that you have a diverse friend group and you guys treat each other like family." I then responded with, "Well, what are you trying to tell me then" in a more agitated tone.

She looked at me in a meaningful way and said, "What I'm trying to say is that when you're out in public with your friend group, people will try to single you out, specifically police." Just as I was about to give her my rebuttal, my ride to the party arrived. I gave her a hug and ran out the house.

In the car I started to ponder what she had told me in my head. I had always seen and read about black people getting singled out for things they didn't do or being falsely accused just because of their skin color. I asked myself, "could that really happen to me?" I then thought this couldn't happen in my town. There's no prejudice or racist people in the town of Voorhees... at least that was what I thought.

As me and my friends arrived at the party, I saw all the Christmas festivities draped all over the house. Red, green, and white Christmas lights were lined in between all the windows and doors, which illuminated the night sky. Miniature elves were lined up across the snow-covered lawn with plastic reindeer running beside them. The Christmas spirit was definitely in the air tonight. As I headed down to the basement where the party was, my eyes were met with about 20 other Santa clones that looked exactly like me. Mostly every guy there was dressed in some sort of Santa hat with a white shirt and some sort of green elf shoes that had bells on them. The party hit the ground running, and the loud, blaring bass of the music vibrated through everyone's body. Before anyone knew, it the whole basement became overwhelmed with dancing. Tables were made into dance floors and the sweat was visible on everyone's faces.

As the night raged on and heat from the dancing was very present in the room, my friend Justin proposed that we take a trip to Wawa to recharge after the party and be stacked with snacks for the sleepover. I looked down at my phone and the time read 12:08 am. I paused for a minute and then answered him hesitantly, "yeah, let's go, but make it fast.

The word soon spread around to my friend group, and now eight of us were on a midnight run to Wawa. All of us left wearing our red matching Santa hats, and in hindsight, we probably should have bundled up more. In my head I knew it was only a 10-minute walk from Jake's to Wawa, but the blistering cold December wind and the steady fall of snowflakes on top of my head were unbearable. All of us were having a good time cracking jokes, recounting the moments that just happened at the party.

It seemed like things were starting to look up for me and the year was just getting started. As I was recounting in my head what I wanted to get on my hoagie at Wawa, two flashing red and blue lights pulled up right behind us and my heart began to sink.

As I stepped forward like the cop asked me to, my teeth began to chatter from the cold and nerves. The cop began to pat me down, his hands up and down my pants and across my stretched-out arms. He then asked me again in a stern aggressive voice, “were you the one who broke the mailboxes?” I answered nervously once again that “no, I was not the one who broke the mailboxes. Please believe me!” I was shocked he had the audacity to ask me that question for the third straight time. I was mad and agitated at him; how could he even single me out when I was with someone else the entire time?

Officer Clark glared at me, then said “All of you other boys are good to go call your parents and go home.” Then, turning to me, he said, “you’re staying with me for a little while.”

My friends glanced at me with sadness and confusion on their faces. They didn’t understand why this was being done to me, and neither did I. My friends’ parents soon came in droves, one by one, until I was the last one left.

The three officers then surrounded me in a circle and continued to question me. I continuously answered “no” to all their questions. I finally got the courage to ask them again what the reason was they had to stop me, and once again they answered, “you particularly stand out.” I then asked, “why do I stand out?” but they wouldn’t answer me.

At this point, I knew I was being racially profiled, and they had no reason to have me out in the dead of December questioning me. I never thought this would be happening to me, and then I thought back to what my mom had said to me in the beginning of the night. What are the odds that what she said would happen to me that night? As the questions continued, tears began to swell up in my eyes and the officers began to see that I was telling the truth.

Clark whispered to the other officers, “I don’t think this our kid.” Then he looked back at me and said, “Call your parents, kid. You’re good to go.” When I looked at him, I had hate and anger in my eyes. I was furious. I had no words for them, nothing but anger.

I called my parents and told them exactly what happened. My parents were mad at me because I was out late at night walking, but they were madder at how the police officers treated me. As I waited for my parents to come and pick me up, one of the officers offered me to sit in their cars. After the incident, I really didn’t want to give in and take their offer, but I had never

been that cold in my life. I hopped in the squad car, the red and blue lights still flashing back and forth.

My parents soon arrived 10 mins later. The cops talked to my parents about what happened and how they made a mistake. On the ride home with my parents, I was dead silent; however, they talked about how I needed to be much more careful, and that stuff like this happening is common among our people. This would be the night I would never forget it.

Ever since that incident, I have a much different approach with police officers. I make sure I know the places where I'm walking and also consider how late it is. If it seems like it is too late, I won't go out and I'll just save the trip for the next day. Now that I can drive, I never jump above the speed limit, and in any situation where I have a chance to get pulled over by the police, I always keep my hands on ten & two on the steering wheel. I'll calmly ask the officer if I can grab my wallet, so it makes it look like I'm not making any sudden movements reaching for something else. Walking into stores with a hoodie on is a no-go for me; I always keep it down until I exit the store. These are my survival tactics.

I know that there are very good police officers out there who protect and serve their communities well, but the personal nerve-racking experience I had with those police officers changed my outlook for life on how I handle myself in those situations. Even with learning about slavery in school since I was ten or eleven, I never truly thought America was inherently racist in today's age.

As I mentioned earlier, I would see things on the news about people of color, especially black people, being wrongfully accused of things, and the police shootings of innocent black men and women. I especially remembered the Ferguson Riots that occurred in 2014 due to the death of the unarmed black teenager Michael Brown. My eleven-year-old eyes were seeing the live display of fires being set off, tear gas being used on the masses, and the large marches and gatherings of people crying for change. I was naïve at the time, only being eleven, and truly didn't understand why people were marching or the magnitude of the protest.

Fast forward three years later after having my own run in with police I completely understand the outcry for protest and why it's such a necessary thing to do, especially for people of color. I was mad at America and furious with our society after experiencing what I had gone

through. This is supposed to be the “land of the free, home of the brave,” they say, but that saying meant less to me than ever before now. How can that be true after the historic struggle of black people in the past and even today?

I had to do some real soul searching and try to find some positives from my situation. I finally realized that what had happened was a blessing in disguise, and I was able to find new light in the whole experience. If this had never occurred, I would never have been woken up to the social injustices that my people face on daily basis. I now understand the call to action for our cause, and that it is truly to benefit the existence of our race in this country. That pivotal moment in my life will always rank high in my memories and experience because of what it taught me and what I personally need to do to play my part to create a more beneficial society here in America. Faith is something that I have for society moving forward, and I know change can happen; we all just have to start from somewhere and it has to be a collective effort from everyone.