



How to Stay Alive While Being Black

In the wake of the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin, some advice for young black boys

MANY BLACK FAMILIES HAVE BEEN forced into uncomfortable but necessary conversations since the Feb. 26 killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. His death and the release of the uncharged shooter, George Zimmerman, have reminded many of how vulnerable we still are. The icy cold wind of racism has crept into our homes and made the hairs on the backs of our necks stand up. Blood memories of strange fruit have been stirred. Young black boys have been reminded that they are walking targets for hate. What do you say to them about what happened to Trayvon? Here's a start:

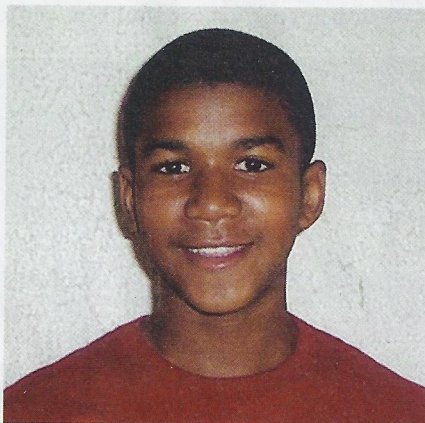
1. It's unlikely but possible that you could get killed today. Or any day. I'm sorry, but that's the truth. Black maleness is a potentially fatal condition. I tell you that not to scare you but because knowing that could save your life. There are people who will look at you and see a villain or a criminal or something fearsome. It's possible they may act on their prejudice and insecurity. Being black could turn an ordinary situation into a life-or-death moment even if you're doing nothing wrong.

2. If you encounter such a situation, you need to play it cool. Keep your wits about you. Don't worry about winning the situation. Your mission is to survive.

3. There is nothing wrong with you. You're amazing. I love you. When I look at you, I see a complex human being with awesome potential, but some others will look at you and see a thug—even if their only evidence is your skin. Their racism relates to larger anxieties and problems in America that you didn't create. When someone is racist toward you—either because they've profiled you or spit some slur or whatever—they are saying they

have a problem. They are not speaking about you. They're speaking about themselves and their deficiencies.

4. You will have to make allowances for other people's racism. That's part of the burden of being black. We can be defiant and dead or smart and alive. I'm not saying you can't wear what you want, but your



A boy's life Martin, in an undated family photo, had gone out to buy Skittles

clothes are a red herring. They'll blame it on your hoodie or your jeans when the real reason they decided you were a criminal is that you're black. Of course, you know better. Racism is about reminding you that you are less human, less valuable, less worthy, less beautiful, less intelligent. It's about prejudging you as violent, fearsome, a threat. Some people will take that prejudice and try to force their will on you to make sure you feel like a second-class citizen and to make certain you get back to the lower-class place they think you're trying to escape. The best way to counter them involves not your fists but your

mind. You know your value to the world and how terrific you are. If you never forget that, they can't damage your spirit. The best revenge is surviving and living well.

5. Be aware of your surroundings. Especially when it's dark. Or bright. Some people are on the lookout for muggers or rapists. You need to be on the lookout for profilers who are judging you. Don't give them an opportunity to make a mistake.

6. If you feel you are being profiled and followed or, worse, chased by someone with a vigilante streak—if you are hunted in the way it seems Trayvon was, by someone bigger than you who may be armed and hopped up on stereotypes about you—then you need to act. By calling the police. That is the exact time to snitch. I know there are times the cops will be your enemies, but sometimes calling 911 and letting the threatening person know that you're doing so could save your life.

7. What if it's the cops who are making you feel threatened? Well, then you need to retreat. I don't mean run away. I mean don't resist. Now is not the time to fight the power. Make sure they can see your hands, follow all instructions, don't say anything, keep your cool. Your goal

is to defuse things, no matter how insulted you are. We'll get revenge later. In the moment, play possum. Say sir. They may be behaving unjustly, but their lives aren't in danger. Yours is. If you survive, you will be able to tell your lawyer what happened. If you don't...

8. Never forget: As far as we can tell, Trayvon did nothing wrong and still lost his life. You could be a Trayvon. Any of us could. ■

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