

OPINION

# Down the road: How Black people keep going after being stopped

On a journey from Surrey to Vancouver, my friend and I took a rear-view look at experiences of injustice at the hands of the police

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1.

Pierre and I are driving back to Vancouver from Surrey along a highway that slices through farmland. He's driving leisurely. It's a Saturday afternoon, unpleasantly hot, so we go back and forth between turning on the AC and opening the windows. In the air, there's wildfire smoke, calls for social justice and a virus.

My friend is in good spirits. He tells me that he's been on a staycation for the past two weeks. Didn't look at his e-mail. Sat around eating ice cream and watching Netflix stand-up specials.

A car passes us. The driver looks in, annoyed. Leisurely has become slow. My right foot pushes down reflexively. I'm mildly embarrassed at my role as an accessory to slow driving.

Pierre catches me looking at the speedometer. He's five kilometres below the speed limit.

Notice how I'm letting everyone pass? he says.

You're giving them a head start, I say.

But he doesn't speed up. A few minutes go by and it feels like we're crawling.

Did you get another ticket or something? I ask.

He takes his eyes off the road to look at me. He seems spooked.

In the time I've known him, he's received tickets for driving through intersections with red-light cameras, for parking when he used to deliver food to pay for school. Something's different this time.

He says, A cop pulled me over.

We both get serious.

I was on my way to meet a client. In Surrey, actually. I was going 20 kilometres over the limit and this cop – he was in a regular car – gave me a ticket.

I wince. That sucks, I say.

Pierre is silent for a while. He is reliving the incident. We are on the same stretch of highway as where he got pulled over.

I know I was going fast, Pierre continues. I was overtaking so I sped up. Obviously. He snorts. And I looked into the car and I saw his eyes and I knew it was a cop right there and then and that he got me. So he flashes his lights and follows me until we get over the bridge. And that's where I pulled off the road. The cop got out and approached on your side. I saw him walking toward me in the mirror. I put both my hands on the steering wheel like in the movies and he put his hand on his gun. The whole time he was talking to me, he kept his hand on his gun.

You know the first thing the cop asked me?

What?



2.

I was in the Vancouver airport on my way to San Francisco for a book event. At the immigration counter, I got sent to the oh-no room. Most of the people in that room were people of colour, including a family where the mother was Middle Eastern and the father was white. The father and two daughters were quickly released but the mother stayed in the holding area with me. As they left, the girls, wearing matching coats, alternately looked back at their mother and up to their father.

When it was my turn, the first thing the white immigration official said to me was not Good morning or Hello, not How are you? or Where are you travelling to today? It was, Have you ever been arrested?

I heard both a question and a threat. The officer detained me for more than 90 minutes. I had to surrender my green card and I missed my flight to San Francisco.

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3.

What? I say again. What did he ask you?

Is this your vehicle? He thought I stole it.

Pierre drives a 2003 Mercedes-Benz Kompressor. A few days before Christmas one year, we went shopping for cars together. The car salesman was a caricature of a car salesman. His large head emerged from a low-buttoned shirt. He counted a wad of money on his desk as fast as an automatic money counter. He informed us that the advertised price, the price Pierre was prepared to pay, was

not the actual price. I stood behind Pierre and said, You can walk away. Just because we drove all the way out here doesn't mean you have to buy it. Pierre, 20 at the time, thought in silence while the salesman and I looked at him. He wanted that car so badly. But he walked away with his \$4,000, all the money he had, and bought from someone else.

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4.

Whenever I enter my vehicle, I stage a veritable Broadway production. I pull out my keys early. I unlock the door many times with the remote from a distance to signal, Yes, this is my car. I am approaching my car, everybody. I shall enter it forthwith. I stage this production a lot at night and in parking garages. The worst thing would be to reach the door unprepared, fumbling for my keys while white people look at me suspiciously over their shoulders.

When Pierre admitted the same fear, we had a voluble bonding session. No way! You too? He told me about a guy who was rubbernecking him outside his house as he was trying to get into his car, about the time someone broke into his car, smashed the rear quarter window, and thus compelled Pierre to get it fixed immediately so people wouldn't think he was driving a stolen vehicle.

Do our efforts even matter though?

Weeks after Pierre got pulled over, police in Colorado drew their guns and handcuffed a Black woman and her children. They thought she was driving a stolen vehicle. Turns out it was her car.

In Winnipeg, a man posts on Facebook:

To the "gentleman" who decided that he needed to make me late for work this morning by stopping me to make sure that I was not stealing my own car,

**YOU ARE THE PROBLEM, NOT ME!**

I can't "move back to where [I] came from" – I was born in this country.

Yes, I'm actually a doctor – I'm glad you were able to read my scrubs.

The other man had blocked his car, interrogated and insulted him. He thought the only way he could afford to buy his car was from selling drugs.

In England, Danny Rose, a British soccer player, gives an interview: "I got stopped by the police last week, which is a regular occurrence whenever I go back to Doncaster where I'm from ... . Each time it's, 'Is this car stolen? Where did you get this car from? What are you doing here? Can you prove that you bought this car?'"

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5.

I tried to explain to the cop that I was passing, Pierre says, but he wouldn't give me a chance to talk, so I just kept quiet, and his hand was – you know – the whole time.

By this point in his story, my entire body is tense.

And this cop, he was the standard white boy. Blue eyes, clean cut. And I was thinking, like, Just tell me what I did and give me the ticket, man.

And meanwhile everyone's passing –

And looking into my car, straight at me, because he's talking to me through the passenger window. And everyone's speeding more than me. And I want to say, Why don't you go after those guys?

Instead, he interrogated Pierre. He humiliated him. Humiliation, like shame, does not require an audience. The officer was silencing him and breaking him, not as a spectacle for the audience of passing cars, not even for the officer's own pleasure, not entirely, but simply because he could. Who needs a reason when you're dealing with Black folks? Why gives way to why not? The officer looked into Pierre's Mercedes and read his demeanour, heard his soft voice and knew that this kid would compliantly play along to script. The officer knew that none of the white kids want to play with him. So he played with the Black kid who is under command from the backchannels of authority to play. If he had met Pierre as a civilian and Pierre had committed a minor social irritation, the word nigger might pulse in the officer's head, but he would leave Pierre alone.

I urge the story forward: So he's interrogating you about all these irrelevant things.

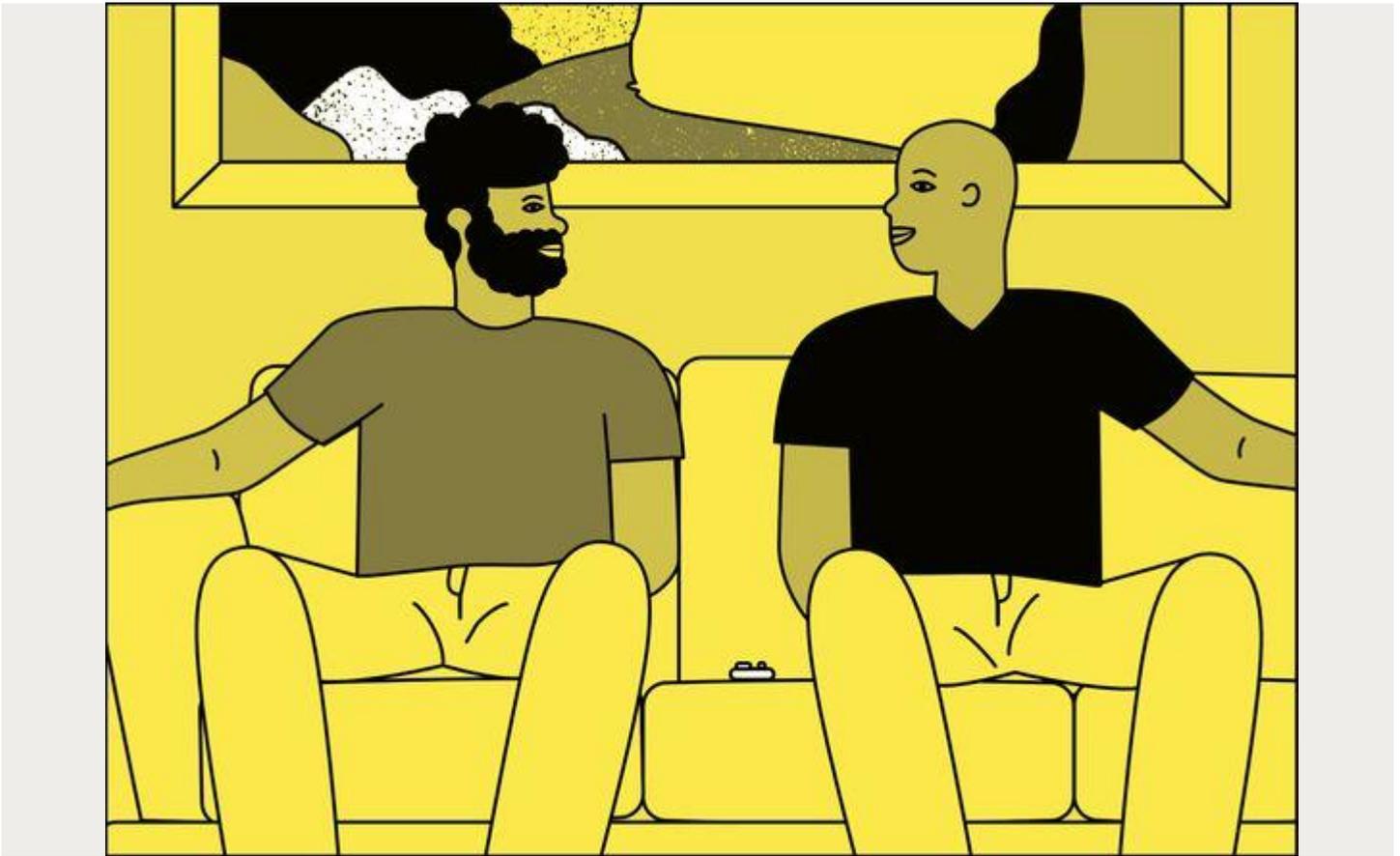
He didn't believe I was a designer or that I was going to meet a client. He asked me about that, like, three times. He asked me what I studied in school. He asked me which school. He asked me my immigration status.

Totally irrelevant, I say.

I had already given him my licence and insurance. Could I have those if I was here illegally?

Maybe he was illiterate, I say.

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6.

I met Pierre at a Filipino church. I was new to Vancouver, trying to find a congregation with people my age who practised an informed Christianity. Including myself, there were three Black folks at the church that day.

I remember Pierre's height, his fancy mixed-metal watch, his collared white shirt under a sweater. He was reserved when I spoke to him. The following week, I went back and saw him again. I asked him if he wanted to do something later, and I think we hiked a trail.

He said he'd been going to that church for five weeks and every week the members greeted him as if he were visiting for the first time. He was annoyed by the constant performance of hospitality that depended on his otherness. Every week, they asked him to stand and wave. At what point would he belong?

Over the next few years, Pierre and I spent every Saturday together, trying out churches in the region in the morning, making lunch, doing something outdoorsy in the afternoon, then watching a movie in the evening while eating heart attacks from Fat Burger. We'd cycle through films by genre, through Kevin James, Kevin Hart, Denzel, Will, Matt Damon. We had a horror-movie phase that ended with the truly terrible movie *The Human Centipede*. He introduced me to Black French rap, waxed eulogistic about Kendrick and J. Cole on long drives out of the city.

We settled on a church in Richmond, not too far from the airport. That church has the greatest concentration of Black people we see each week, which is to say about 10.

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7.

Only with clichés and the invincibility of youth can Pierre make sense of the disorienting incident with the officer.

He says, You never think this kind of stuff is going to happen to you. You know it could happen, just not to – He turns off the AC and opens the sunroof. So anyway, now I drive like this.

You didn't do anything wrong, I say.

I was speeding.

All right, yeah, fine.

I was trying to give him What He Needed. But it's hard to know with Pierre. His willingness to accept responsibility deflates me.

It would be simpler to have this conversation if he were innocent and we could both make righteous fists against the police.

I go on, You realize that only 10 per cent of that interaction had anything to do with speeding.

I know.

Even when you do something wrong, you're entitled to humane treatment, I say. Even Cain.

We both know the denouement of the Cain and Abel story. After God punishes him, Cain worries that someone will nevertheless kill him in retaliation. God says, No, if anyone kills you, I will take revenge. I promise. Here, I'm going to put a mark on you to warn folks not to harm you.

Over time, the story gets perverted and people – white people, no doubt – claim that Cain became the first Black man, meaning that Black people are cursed by God from the beginning, that we deserve everything we get, that our suffering is a kind of preordained, original karma. But in the original text, God actually intends the mark as a blessing, as a mitigation of Cain's suffering.

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8.

Not to dwell too much on Cain, but when I teach Phillis Wheatley's poem, *On Being Brought from Africa to America*, I spend a long time on the closing couplet:

Remember, *Christians, Negroes*, black as *Cain*, May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

There's a lot to say: Wheatley appeals to the Christianity of her white audience. She sets herself at its mercy. Yet she also positions Christians and Negroes side by side so for a moment they're interchangeable. You're not sure which one is the subject. And, to the point, she plays into the misreading of Cain and Blackness, opting to have a bad soul rather than no soul at all. Even Cain deserves Christian treatment, she's arguing.

When I lived in the States, I had a Hungarian church friend who loved the movie *Coming to America*. He learned English from it. Neither he nor his people were brought to America under the worst

conditions, and I always marvelled at how easily he could slip into the embrace of American, practically overnight, even with his accent, in a way that I or Pierre or any diasporic African never would be able to.

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9.

I admit I was going fast, Pierre says again. I thought I was going to get a warning. But he gave me two tickets.

Two? I ask. For how much?

Pierre hesitates. He looks embarrassed. Finally he says, For \$1,000.

A thousand!

To this day, I don't know what the second ticket is for.

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10.

I tell Pierre about the times I have been stopped.

The first time was in Alabama. We had dropped off my brother at college for the fall semester. It was still dark, maybe 4:30 a.m., and we were at the beginning of a 16-hour drive back to Canada. A family friend was driving. My mother was in the passenger seat. I was in the back. A white officer pulled us over because we were driving below the speed limit on a road with no traffic. He asked us what we were doing there and where we were going. But he wouldn't let my mother speak. I'm not speaking to you, ma'am, he said ostensibly because she wasn't driving. He didn't give us a ticket. We continued, feeling shaken and grateful. It's weird how we're so disoriented by these encounters that we leave them feeling grateful when, in fact, we should be furious, seeing as the officer had no basis on which he could give us a ticket.

Fifteen years later, I got the only speeding ticket of my life in Vancouver, despite going the speed of traffic. The moment in Alabama is always with me, so I try not to be too fast or too slow. I wasn't looking at the speedometer, but fine I accepted the officer's assessment, which is not to say that I wasn't pitying myself, asking, Why me? Why me? while the other cars whizzed past us. I disputed the ticket. It was the only time I've ever been to court.

I even told Pierre about my mother who got hit from the back exiting a gas station and, not long afterward, hit someone from the back. The police in both cases declared that she was wrong. Cumulatively I have spent hours of uh-huh uh-huh conversation with her as she tried to understand, Why am I always in the wrong?

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11.

There's more, Pierre says. He towed my car.

Unnecessary, I say. Pierre doesn't drink or use any substances. He was only going 20 kilometres an hour above the speed limit, not racing along like some of the city's brightly coloured Lamborghinis and Ferraris. Or even like some Teslas.

The cop asked me if I had anyone to come get me, Pierre says. I was on the side of the road. I said no.

You should've called me, I said.

You were busy. I didn't want to bother you.

I have a rush of guilt. I am, sadly, one of those tiresome people who always claims to be busy or tired. About a month before the present incident, Pierre had a flat tire and I missed his call because I was in the middle of a winding conversation with my mother. When I called Pierre back, close to an hour later, I found out he was stranded on his way back from Whistler but had already arranged a tow truck. He was okay. Just a flat.

Still, I suspect it wasn't just busyness that deterred him from calling me after the cop towed his car. It was shame, already coursing its way through his self-perception.

Anyway, Pierre says. The cop called the tow truck and they towed my car and I had no choice – I had to get into the back of his car.

I imagine all 6 feet 3 inches of Pierre squished into the back seat, looking out the window, looking at his phone, looking anywhere but into the officer's reflected eyes.

I can't explain that feeling, he says. I felt like I was being arrested. My whole life, I never thought –

Encounters with the police feel like near-death experiences. You see the light. Your life flickers before your eyes like scenes of a montage. If something happened to you, who would know?

Pierre says, I saw my parents' faces.

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12.

The cop dropped Pierre off at a gas station.

His vehicle was impounded for seven days. When he went to get his car, Pierre expected the same hassle as with the police officer.

But it was easy, he says. I showed them proof, some ID and two minutes later they let me have it.

He can't predict how the world works any more. When will white bureaucracy step in to inconvenience him? When do minor infractions beget exaggerated consequences? When might he get lucky?

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13.

I got home and for two weeks I couldn't do anything, Pierre explains.

That was the period he was calling a vacation.

I just watched Netflix, all the comedy specials I could find, trying to make myself happy again. I ate ice cream and sat in bed. I didn't work. Didn't call my family. Out of the blue, Pastor Ron called me. He was all friendly, didn't want anything.

On the morning of the day that Pierre tells me this story, the Zoom sermon was based on Micah 6:8: What does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

Pastor Ron said that justice meant holding yourself to the highest standard while extending mercy to those who fault you. In other words, police yourself, not other people.

It's very Martin Luther King.

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14.

You know what I was listening to when he pulled me over?

Kendrick, I say. Pierre has been having a Kendrick Lamar renaissance.

Right, he says. So as this cop's coming toward the car, Kendrick's going – and at this point Pierre sings with his shoulders – We gonna be all right!

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15.

Next time, I say, call me. It doesn't matter if I'm busy or with someone or in an airport somewhere. Just call me if anything happens.

He is quiet.

I feel the futility of trying to protect a Black person from danger. If anything happens. If Pierre had been shot or tasered in his car, what could I do? It is already too late.

Maybe I'm insistent because I don't want to learn of his death on the news. I want this young, Black man to be distinguishable from other endangered young Black men.

He is so soft-spoken that you constantly have to ask him to repeat himself. He quit his job after three months and started his own business when he realized he could do everything the firm was doing on his own. He likes his pants cut just above the ankle. Never wears socks. Can identify the model and sometimes the year of every car on the road at a glance. Became boyish when I bought him a toy car for his last birthday. The cop's version of resisting arrest would be the only one in circulation.

I say, Next time – It's so sad to have to say next time.

I try again: Next time, the minute you're pulled over, start recording on your phone. When the cop gets to the window, let him know that you are recording this interaction. He knows the time we're living in. He knows if he doesn't act correct – if he doesn't treat you like everyone else – he's gonna be all over the internet, that the repercussions are finally real.

I've taken on the tone of the righteously indignant.

But again I've missed the target.

Pierre says, I looked him up when I got home. He's been fired twice. He was involved in some kind of corruption thing.

And he's back on the streets. Tell me, how does that happen?

Yeah, I don't know.

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16.

I'm the third person Pierre has told about the incident.

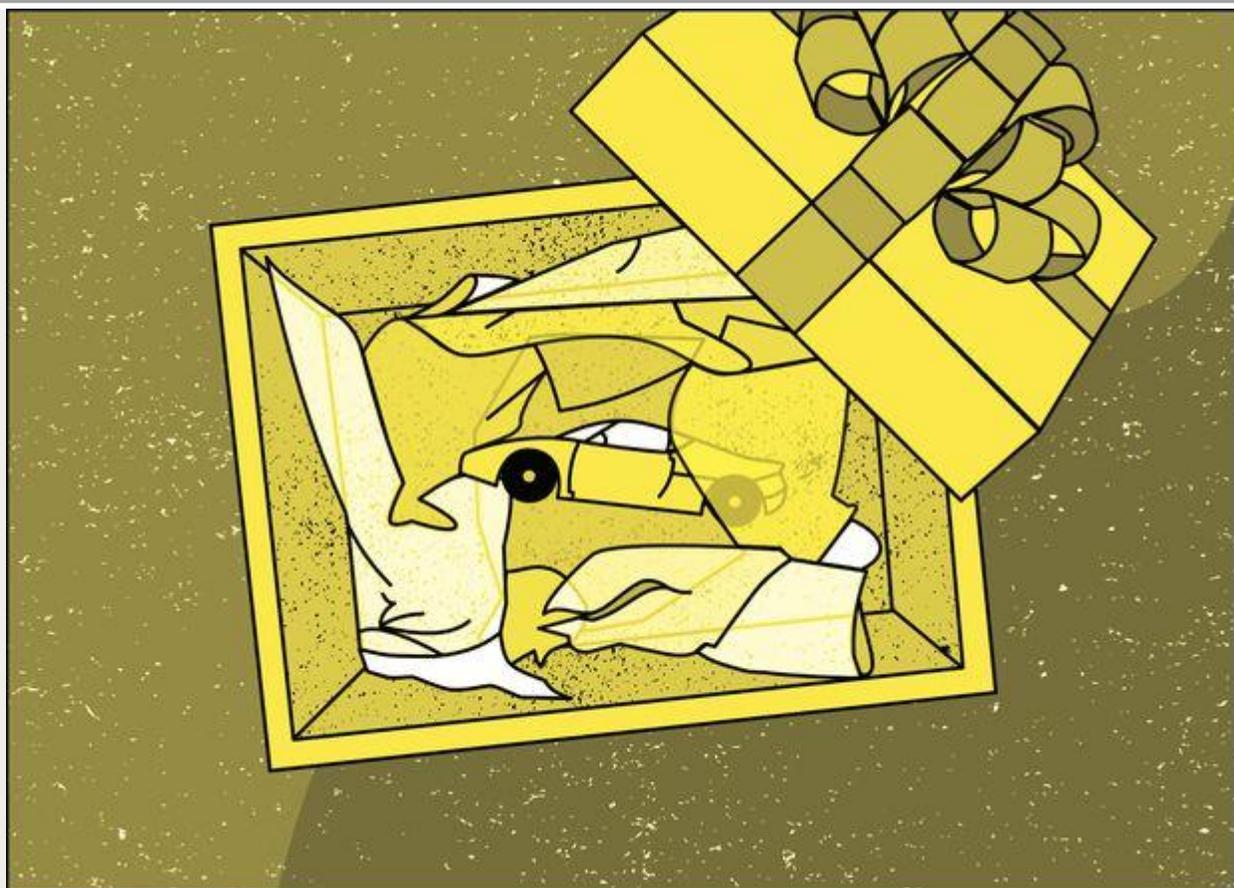
He told two specific African friends: one studying in the Philippines and another who studied in Maine before going back to Africa. Why them? Why me? I think it's for the same reason Black people acknowledge each other in the street or create a Black club in high school. We need each other to anchor ourselves against waves of racial disorientation. It sometimes baffles white people, this intimacy between Black people, even strangers. We seem to be affirming each other only because we are Black when, in fact, we are affirming to the other that I see you as more than Black.

Have you told your parents? I ask.

No way, he says. Not even my brother.

I can understand why. His parents would tell him to forget about North America, just come back to Africa, for his safety and his dignity.

My mother tries to get my brother back to Canada at every opportunity, not really for her sake – he doesn't have to live near her – but just to increase his chances of staying alive. So far, he's outlived her fears in Alabama and North Carolina. He works out and eats well and hopefully will die of natural causes. That's as optimistic as I can be about his future in America.



17.

We make it back to Vancouver.

In the elevator of my building, he sniffs upward. I smell it, too.

Someone's been to Church's Chicken, he says. Not KFC. Church's.

I laugh. So specific. We're aware of what Americans think about Black people and fried chicken, a stereotype that neither of us knew until moving to the continent. But we also think the Church's Chicken on Fraser Street is brilliantly designed: glass everywhere so you can practically read the menu from the street, private drive-through, bright yellow sign floating like Christ the Redeemer over Rio.

In my condo, neither of us eats. We watch a comedy special where a white woman is funny until she says, I'm from the South but I'm not a Southern belle, not until I need to be. Then we watch a Black man who says, I'm split: I can't be a Democrat because I'm a Christian and I can't be a Republican because I'm Black.

And so we shut off YouTube and Pierre tells me another driving story.

When I went back to my country for my sister's wedding, he says, I was driving somewhere to pick up some gifts. It was midnight, no one was on the road and I was speeding. There was a cop parked off the road in a spot where he could see me but I couldn't see him. And he caught me. He came up to me and said, Good night. I said, Good night. He told me that I was speeding. I didn't deny it. It was true. But I did tell him about the wedding and the gifts and that I could see ahead of me for hundreds of metres. The cop looked at me and he could tell that I wasn't drunk. And you know what? He didn't give me a ticket. He said, I'm gonna let you go. But don't speed again, all right? Like a dad. And you know what? I didn't speed. I saw him parked in the same spot on my way back and I waved at him and he waved back good night.

It's almost midnight when Pierre decides to leave my place and drive home.

He does not message to let me know whether he arrives safely.

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