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ONE BLOOD

AS A BLACK MAN WHO JUST TURNED 50, I am haunted by the fact that George Floyd died and I'm still alive.

George Floyd and I were both born in 1973, only three months and four days apart. I was born on July 10; he was born on October 14. We both grew up poor. He grew up in the Cuney Homes housing project of Houston's Third Ward, an impoverished black neighborhood that was the result of the racist institution of slavery. I grew up poor in an upscale, predominantly white neighborhood of Warwick, RI, where my mother couldn't afford to empty the cesspool in the backyard except once a year, so I was only allowed to take a shower on Sundays; the rest of the days, I washed up in the bathroom sink with a washcloth. We could only flush the toilet after going poop, which meant if one of us forgot to put the lid down, the stench of the urine in the humid summer heat would be so loathsome and intolerable it'd force me out of the house.

Floyd and I were both fatherless mama's boys raised by a single mother who worked more than one job. Like Floyd, when I was a child, I would latch onto my mother's leg and sit in her lap whenever anyone came over to our house. Both Floyd and I did heavy drugs, smoked menthol cigarettes, had learning disabilities, struggled in school, but had strong convictions that God would see us through. We both had big muscular bodies, which intimidated Whites, even big White muscular men at the gym. We both built our bodies to feed the insecurities of not fitting into White America.

Only geography separated Floyd's life from my own — he was born in Fayetteville North Carolina and raised in Houston; I was born and raised in Providence. We were two Negro men with the same unfulfilled dreams, the same body type, the same challenges, and the same solution: a new life in a new state. He moved to Minneapolis to get off drugs and make a better life. I went to Boston after graduating from Rhode Island College with a degree in accounting to temp as a pricing analyst at what was then the world's largest mutual fund company, Skudder Kemper Investments. Then I

earned a master's degree in journalism at Emerson College.

My continued but waning hope is to bring a harbinger of light on the racial problems that Blacks are forced to tackle every single day; to bring about a seminal moment where Blacks can exhale collectively in every corner of this country through real justice; to finally end what happened to Floyd, which is what's happening in our education system, our healthcare system, and the halls of Washington.

It's been three years since four police officers squeezed the soul out of the body of George Floyd on the streets of our democratic republic. In the immediate aftermath of his death, I had palpable hope that the country might defy history's physics. Protests over Floyd's death popped up around the globe. His face was painted in Minneapolis and Houston and Nairobi and Haiti. People of all political stripes acknowledged that racism plays a major role in American society and needs to be proactively eliminated. The country felt by turns hopeful and combustible, hinging on the feelings of activists of all colors who were prepared to unleash more unrest if White police and politicians continued to divorce themselves from addressing systemic racism. The mayor of Washington, D.C., Muriel Bowser, renamed a section of 16th Street "Black Lives Matter Plaza" in June 2020. Seeing those words emblazoned in 35-foot-tall yellow capital letters in front of the White House near Lafayette Square, near a statue of Andrew Jackson — a slaver, ethnic cleanser, and former president — was more powerful than seeing Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel. That momentum and the lessons of Floyd's heinous killing have already faded with the news cycle, and my indignation about *that* flags in the wake of America's backsliding on the injustice of racism.

Floyd is not here to suffer new counterattacks that have emerged against Blacks or the pushback against discussing America's systemic racism in our school classrooms. He's not here to fear racist White politicians who are winning elections by outlawing the teaching of Critical Race Theory in schools, banning books about racism, and books written by Black authors. Eight states have banned Critical Race Theory; 16 have a ban in progress. More than half the states have banned at least one of these Black authors' books: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Maya Angelou's *And Still I Rise*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Ruby Bridges's *This is Your Time*. Floyd's

not here to lament the lack of any legislation of policing since his death, nor was he able to witness the condemnation Republican Senator Mitch McConnell issued to House Democrats on June 8, 2022. McConnell urged Congress to pass a bill that would increase security protection for Supreme Court justices and their families after Nicholas John Roske, a 26-year-old from Simi Valley, CA, called authorities and said he wanted to kill Justice Brett Kavanaugh. “House Democrats have spent weeks blocking the measure that passed here unanimously related to security for Supreme Court justices,” McConnell said at the time. “House Democrats must pass this bill and they need to do it today. No more fiddling around with this. They need to pass it today. They need to stop their multi-week blockade against the Supreme Court security bill and pass it before the sun sets today.”

That was the White majority leader of the Republican Party who said, right after Floyd was killed, “We have a way of dealing with crime in this country — it’s called prosecution and conviction. Everybody is entitled to the protections of the court system, even people who apparently — if you see what happened — look pretty darn guilty.” But McConnell refused to bring the George Floyd Policing in Justice Act to the Senate floor for a vote, even though the then-Chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, Rep. Karen Bass of California (now mayor of Los Angeles) beseeched him to heed the calls of the American people after the House of Representatives passed the bill with bipartisan support. “How many more mothers and fathers must mourn the loss of a child to police violence?” asked Bass. “How many more children must be raised without a parent lost to police violence? How many more videos must we watch before you will act? Enough is enough.”

McConnell is the same man who was asked repeatedly for his views on the “great replacement” theory, a conspiracy theory that holds that Blacks are trying to replace Whites, and who avoided denouncing the theory. McConnell was then asked whether he, as party leader, had a responsibility to speak out against the theory, which authorities say was adopted by 18-year-old white supremacist Payton Gendron — a man who drove two hundred miles and killed ten Blacks at Tops Supermarket in Buffalo, New York on May 14, 2022. Before carrying out his deadly racist attack, Gendron wrote a 180-page manifesto in which he stated he wanted to “kill as many Blacks as possible,” and, before he began shooting, yelled out that Blacks were trying to “ethnically replace my own people.” McConnell’s silence reflects a reactionary agitation taking place across the country about whether the amplified focus on race

has gone too far.

A month before Gendron went on his racist killing spree, a poll taken by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that seven out of ten Republicans said they believe in the ideas that constitute the great replacement theory. In less than three years, the United States has gone from a deeper examination of racism from all corners, as organizations and individuals alike castigated themselves for not doing enough to take down a culture of racism, to 68% of Republicans believing that the recent shift in the country is “not a natural change but has been motivated by progressive and liberal leaders actively trying to leverage political power by replacing more conservative White voters.” The SPLC poll also found that half of all Republicans have negative feelings about the fact that census projections show America won’t have a majority of White people in 25 years. And more than half of Republicans surveyed agreed that “the changing demographics of America pose a threat to White Americans and their culture and values.”

“This can’t be real,” I said when I read that, wondering what the point was in trying to live a better life if a White police officer could so easily snatch my life away. I thought of something James Baldwin said: “I sometimes feel it to be an absolute miracle that the entire Black population of the United States of America has not long ago succumbed to raging paranoia.” For many months, we Blacks looked for a way to cope with the fact that we had endured such trauma seeing the killing of George Floyd. It created much fear and paranoia that we would end up like him. Watching America backsliding on Black rights has left me as equally paranoid.

Floyd said to the officers “I can’t breathe” some 27 times, yet each time he yelled those words he was ignored. I still burst into tears remembering Floyd’s neck cranked under the weight of Derek Chauvin’s knee. It wasn’t supposed to be this way in 2020, to be this hard to thrive in a country that states in its Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Life isn’t supposed to end with an elder Black man — Charles McMillian, a sixty-one-year-old who grew up in rural Mississippi, moved to Minneapolis with a third-grade education, had his own struggles with the police, and was two decades free of a crack cocaine addiction — telling another Black man, 15 years his junior, pinned down by four White policemen on the pavement in a democratic republic, “You can’t win.” That was the last

conversation Floyd ever had, with an elderly Black man he didn't know telling him that he could not win, that we Blacks cannot win.

Floyd, unlike me, didn't run from his Blackness. He lived it. He even went back to North Carolina in search of his ancestral roots and met members of his family he had never connected with. I spent 49 years trying to run, but everything I did, everywhere I went to better my life, the racism that touches every crook and cranny of our nation worked to stop me from attaining the dream I had of the world knowing my name.

My first victim was a White kid in the first grade. I came upon him in our classroom one afternoon in our elementary school. As I approached him from behind, there seemed to be a generous amount of space between us. And yet he cast back a worried glance. It appeared to him that I, a timid, awkward, skinny Black kid who was surrounded by 25 other White kids and Mrs. Hickey, our White teacher, was menacing. After a few more quick glimpses, he picked up his Tonka trucks and was soon moving away in earnest. Within seconds I stepped to him, and said, "Do you wanna play?" He responded, "My parents told me I'm not allowed to play with niggers."

That was 43 ago. I was six years old, newly arrived and not yet adjusted to the ways of the White culture I was thrust into. It was in that White boy's natural timidity that I began to understand the ability I had to alter the spaces I entered. It was clear that he thought me a spook, a boogeyman, or worse. As a kid who was terrified to leave my mother's side, who cried every day when she dropped me off at school, what he did not know, what he could not have known, was that I was more afraid of him than he was of me. I was embarrassed and frightened of my Black body. I wanted to be liked so badly, and, in my young brown eyes, to be liked meant to be accepted by Whites. His flight made it clear that I was indistinguishable from anything scary.

That first racist incident showed me the strange abject fear that Whites had of Blacks and the unnerving tectonic plate between the races. While big ideas on addressing racism swirled around every major institution in America during my education, and as my thirties passed and middle age reared over the horizon, I came to accept that Blackness – my Blackness – was itself perceived as hazardous to White America's health. I only needed to sit in a restaurant or walk down Newbury Street or drive through Back Bay or make an errant move after being pulled over by a White

police officer – which happened in that unforgettably awful year, 2020.

It was 9:30 at night October 13, the eve of what would've been George Floyd's 47th birthday. I was heading to my home in Cranston from Narragansett after having spent a few hours writing at a nature preserve. I took the scenic route as I always do, which took me through East Greenwich, a predominantly White town. I was driving a Honda Element, an SUV that looks like a rectangular box. It's not exactly the kind of vehicle you speed

or show off in, so I didn't know why the police officer was pulling me over. There was no one on the streets. I didn't know where the police officer came from. And I instantly got nervous. I was afraid because I didn't have a mask, and I didn't want to open my window. I didn't want to get out of my car. We were in the throes of the pandemic, and I didn't want to get COVID. So when he came to my passenger-side window, I didn't roll it down. I turned on the lights inside of my car.

"What do you want?" I asked him through my closed window, annoyed that he had no mask on, but nervous thinking about what had just happened to George Floyd.

The officer proceeded to open my door without my permission.

"It's locked," I yelled, stunned he tried to open it. Wearing no mask, no less. It was the same kind of treatment that Floyd went through before he was killed in broad daylight in the middle of a busy intersection. I was in the middle of White suburbia all alone on a dark, deserted road. Just me and him.

With a serious countenance, I yelled, "What do you want?" Trying to remain calm, not panic. There is this belief that you become accustomed to being confronted by police. I'm here to tell you, you don't. The nature of how chemicals operate in the brain does not change from race to race – the physiology of fear works the same way under the skin. Race may be a White-made categorization, but the inner workings of the body know nothing about such a thing. "I don't have a mask to put on."

"You were going fifty-two in a forty-five," he said.

I thought to myself, He's bothering me for this? It's 9:30 at night. There's no one

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around, and we're in the middle of a plague the likes of which we haven't seen in a hundred years. I proceeded to open my glove compartment to get my registration, my insurance card, and then took my wallet out of my pocket to get my license. I cracked open the window just enough to slide them through and then closed it right quick.

"That's a fancy wallet," he said through the closed window.

"No, it's not," I replied calmly, but frustratingly. "I got it on Amazon. It cost fifteen dollars."

"That little latch came with it?"

"Yes," I said demonstrating it to him. I thought to myself, Is he for real? What the hell do you really want? Did he pull me over just to aggravate me because I'm a Negro?

"If everything comes back fine, you're free to go," he said then walked back to his patrol car.

"Of course it's gonna come back fine," I said out loud in the car. "This is ridiculous."

My longtime "egalitarian" state has some of the most glaring disparities between Blacks and Whites in the country. Blacks make up only 6.77% of the population. Whites make up a whopping 80.46%. Not much has changed since I was kid. Most people think New England is acceptingly diverse with as many shades of color as its autumn leaves. But growing up, I saw firsthand just how dismissive Whites were toward the concerns of Blacks. And I understood that the state, with all its liberal and progressive bravado, possessed a prejudice that lingered from its colony days, when it had the highest percentage of enslaved people in New England and was a dominant player in the global slave trade. This fact couldn't be hidden underneath the state's brilliant foliage or its snowy, icy shroud. For a long time, I foolishly believed its false notion that it was a place where every culture got along and that the risks that threatened my existence would fully go away. To make my big dreams come true, I behaved like both an obsequious ass-kissin' Uncle Tom and a swaggering braggadocio, not realizing that by behaving in that manner, I was casting aspersions on myself. I was broken by racism, searching for a way to find dignity, trying to survive in a nation that provided me with limited options. It took me too long to learn that my sense of dignity could not be realized in private Ivy League schools or fancy degrees or affirmations. Rather, I had to tap into my full potential as Black man willing to take on the racism that hobbled me. The challenge was to be in

control of my life before someone else — a police officer — could.

After about ten minutes the officer came back, and said to me, “Your registration is the old kind. They’ve updated them. It’s not on Manila paper anymore, it’s on white. But you’re not due to renew your registration until next year. I saw that in the computer. And the insurance card you gave me is an old insurance card, it has expired dates on it, but I can see in the computer that you have insurance and it’s current.”

“You can see all that on your computer?” I asked. I wanted so badly to say, “Then why the hell are you asking me for these things if you can see it all on your computer?”

“I put hand sanitizer on my hands so your stuff is clean,” he said as I cracked open the window to grab my paperwork. I closed it just as fast.

“Thank you,” I said and put it on the floor. I grabbed a few hand wipes from my container on the passenger seat, and wiped my hands. The whole drive home I kept saying to myself, he pulled me over for nothing, and may have exposed me to COVID.

It wasn’t the first time a white police officer had pulled me over for nothing, but it was the first time a police officer had pulled me over since the murder of George Floyd. Recalling what happened to Floyd reminded me of what happens, what will happen to us Blacks, if White America ignores the residue of historically racist policing and policies. America has for too long been too uncomfortable to reckon with racism. But in the words of James Baldwin, “The story of the Negro in America is the story of America. It is not a pretty story.” If White America continues on its current backsliding trajectory in dealing with racism it’ll lead to a serious threat to our sovereignty, to our security, and quite realistically to our democratic institutions – and that’s not theoretical. Had these racist policies never existed, Floyd would be alive today. Instead of being born poor and oppressed, Floyd could’ve been born a wealthy descendant of his once enslaved great-great-grandfather, Hillary Thomas Stewart, who came to own five hundred acres of farmland in North Carolina – if racist Whites hadn’t stripped him of his landholdings. Floyd could’ve been able to pursue his dream of going to college, playing football, and getting recruited into the NFL – if the underfunded and segregated public schools and dilapidated and segregated public housing slum he was raised in hadn’t defined his life.

I’ve thought often about how what happened to Floyd could’ve very easily happened to me, could still happen to me. I think about how just a few degrees separated him

and me. In Warwick, the small, suburban town where I came of age in the 1980s, I scarcely stood out against a backdrop of preppy, snobby, wealthy Whites. I grew up desperate to be one of the White boys I went to school with. My Blackness took a back seat, though I could always see it in the mirror. I hoped with my light-skinned complexion I could pass, but it didn't stop Whites from calling me a high yella piccaninny. I was willing to erase my Blackness in order to be like the well-off smart White classmates who wore Ralph Lauren polo shirts, spent their summer vacations going to Disney World, and had both a mother and a father at home. I emulated everything they did. I guilted my mother into buying me Polo Ralph Lauren attire even though we couldn't afford it. I smelled of Ralph Lauren's Polo cologne that made girls come by my locker to get a whiff and guys ask for a spray; I wore it to mask the inferiority I felt from only being able to shower once a week. I overcame my mathematics and reading learning disabilities after the humiliating experience of being pulled out of class to go to Resources every Tuesday in elementary and middle school. In high school, I put myself into college-prep classes and graduated with honors.

As I grew older and the summers of racial stress settled into winters of nervous anticipation, I took precautions to make myself less threatening. I employed what have proven to be tension-reducing measures. Around Whites, I moved with care, particularly in the evenings. I gave a wide berth to nervous Whites while shopping in the grocery store, walking through a parking lot, standing in an elevator, or sitting on a subway. If I entered a building behind someone White who appear skittish, worried I might attack them, I slowed my pace and created distance between us so as not to frighten them or appear to be following them. I smiled and was extremely congenial when crossing paths. Even steely policemen cottoned to me. They smiled and said hi, seemingly undisturbed by the sight of a tall muscular Black man on a nightly constitutional. It was my equivalent of the headlamps runners wear when jogging at night. It was nice and a little weird. I learned to smother the rage I felt at so often being taken for a criminal or some monstrous beast. Not to do so would surely have led to madness or praying for the sweet release that only death can bring.

But my desire and need to fit into White society and behave in such a submissive way ended the day I watched a racist police system ignore George Floyd's pleas for mercy. Seeing a White man kneeling on a Black man's neck slowly killing him and hearing a Black man beg for his life brought gravitas and commitment to love my

Blackness – I decided to own it, to live it, to feel it, to embrace it, and to never allow another racist White make me shrink from it. Today, I feel fearless like a renegade. I’m an unapologetic Negro.

I don’t quite know how I’ve kept my wits; I don’t know how I’ve managed to be sharp and honest and loving and hurt and pained and violently angry all at once. I suppose my mind and heart are well-steeled because they know racism never goes away — it only hides. There are nights when I lie in bed thinking about all the prosecutors had going for them to convict the police officers — a Black MMA fighter who knew and identified the blood choke Chauvin used on Floyd, an EMT who refused to quit asking the officers to check Floyd’s pulse, a Black teenage girl unafraid to record Floyd’s death on her smartphone then post it on Facebook for the world to see, and a Black Attorney General who was willing to file murder charges against the police officers. Yet with all of that, us Black folk still didn’t believe the police would be convicted. That tells me something.

Other nights, my emotions are raw, and I try to find words to write how I feel. Language can sometimes limit the ability to describe the connections we form with one another. These are the nights when I have this dream of Floyd standing at the Lincoln Memorial where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech. He’s waving a giant flag with the Black power fist framed by the names of the Black men and women whose families never attained the justice that Floyd’s did. In my dream, Floyd is surrounded by a flower garden with wood chips. The wood chips are from the debris of Minneapolis businesses that burned in the aftermath of Floyd’s murder. In the background, I can hear indecipherable dialogue, so I step closer, closer until I’m finally able to make out the voice of MLK speaking his last and most prophetic words. It’s April 3, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee. The night before a White man murdered him.

“Like anybody,” he says. “I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land! So I’m happy tonight, I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!” 