

## **I Should've Told You This Before**

*Isaiah Hug*

Maggie,

We have known each other for almost three years now. We have been together for the majority of that time. As such we have become familiar with each other, almost disturbingly so. We know each other's quirks, our likes and dislikes, and our family situations. We understand our individual histories, our slightly different senses of humor, and to some extent, our aspirations. But there is one part of my life, and a major one at that, that you have not learned about. About a month ago, while on the phone with you I addressed this blind spot, particularly about how we as a couple had not really talked about it sufficiently. I use "we" liberally because in this case the responsibility falls on me, for this is a problem that, while you may know it exists, you have not been equipped with the requisite history of this problem. You have not had the opportunity to fully comprehend it. But to be honest, very few white girls truly understand their black boyfriends in their entirety. There is a myriad of reasons as to why that is. But the important part is that when we were discussing this, I was cynical in thinking that you didn't know and wouldn't ever truly understand the nature of living with black skin. But you replied, "I want to know."

This made me happier than I let on. Sometimes I forget that behind that hard and jaded Scorpio visage is a compassionate, caring, and loving person. Maybe I am the only one that has the privilege of seeing under this mask, but it's there. If I recall correctly, at that time we did not tackle the issue. I am a coward for this, but realistically how am I to explain the entirety of my existence, the reality of an entire people, and their four-hundred-year history in a phone call? Is it my responsibility to educate every white person who is unconscious of the world that *I* live in? Is that even possible? The pragmatist—which I would like to think I am one of—would argue yes. Simply because if we won't, who will? I think it is also in both our interests that I do, as we have had our fair share of awkward moments about my race. From your parents' strange and random allusions to information and media that they think proves them as being "woke," or your one aunt's immediate distaste for me despite my politeness, or most recently, your initial apathy towards my distress following a racist incident

on the campus that I now call home. As I said, it's not as if you were unaware of the issue when these things happened, but I feel that we never really processed anything together. Any restitution was only a superficial, "Don't worry, I'm used to it" or a "I know, I'm a stupid white girl." We said these things to deflect the discomfort. Yet, these superficial words hold tremendous meaning.

For me, being black is not just about soul food, rap music, coco butter, or celebrating Black History Month. For me, it is an integral part of my life that informs what 'I can and can't do' and how the world perceives me. It informs every dap I give out, or don't. It informs what I wear, what music I listen to, the looks I give and receive, who I date, who I vote for, what I study, and what I live through. All because of where I was coincidentally born. This madness stems from the culture of the country we live in, as it facilitates all of this, while telling us that it isn't doing so. By this logic, your father didn't insist on sharing a country song lamenting the death of Trayvon Martin in an attempt to connect with his daughter's black boyfriend; instead, he was just an innocent fan of the song and wanted to share. Or your aunt didn't glare at me last summer because I'm black, but rather it was because of something that I said. Hell, maybe she just didn't like me. These two examples stick out to me because they cover the two types of interactions that I often have with white people.

It wasn't as if your dad was malicious in his attempt, nor was he original. It is almost a cliché for the older white person to reference something "woke" in an attempt to inform my judgement of them. Your father is a sweet guy. He doesn't have a malicious bone in his body. But he has not been trained for these interactions. I do not blame him for this, but when one is imprecise, there are consequences.

I do not know if while the song was playing you looked into my eyes—if you weren't too busy trying to sink into the floor in mortification. I don't think you did, because as you know I have a horrible poker face, and if you had you would've seen an intense sadness in my eyes. Not only was the song melancholy, but Trayvon hits a certain nerve for me. I remember when he was killed back when I was in middle school. I remember the news coverage, the investigation, the political firestorm, the racists on the internet pumping the idea into my head that Trayvon deserved it, the trial, and the subsequent exoneration of his killer. I remember having the "talk" with my mom, the *one* that was compulsory for every black family with a

black son. I remember thinking, if Trayvon, the sweet teenage boy who was scrawny and had a baby face, could scare someone into killing him just by walking around at night, how would I fare? I am muscular, imposing, and have a temper.

I remember right after the shooting happened I found myself lost in a white neighborhood, at night, in the rain, with a black hoodie on. All twelve-year-old me could think about was my own mortality. Whenever I recounted this story for other people, it was for comedic affect; the sort of morbid humor that you love. But that is simply a way for me to try and bury the sheer terror I felt that night. But no matter what I do it will always be a shallow grave. To this day, the terror still persists. I have learned to control it, but it's there. The terror is still there, Maggie. Every time I don a black hoodie at night, in the back of my mind is the fate of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Gardner, Philado Castile, Alton Sterling, Prince Jones, the black kid that was shot holding an airsoft rifle in Walmart, the black kid that was shot in the back fleeing police, the black guy who was killed on tape by officers who were behind him while he was on his knees handcuffed, the black man that was mauled by a police dog in New Jersey; and, in the back of my mind, I wonder what makes me so special?

So, when your father played that song, I felt all of that. Plus, I saw Trayvon's face, and I recalled Zimmerman's smug and arrogant behavior and how he was all but rewarded for his actions that night. You couldn't tell, but I was holding back tears. Don't let the laughs and dismissals afterwards fool you, you are too smart for that. The laughs and the jokes hide a visceral pain and sadness and rage that never truly goes away.

Now, why did I not express all of this when I was initially confronted with it? It would've required me to be extremely vulnerable. And vulnerability is not a luxury that I have all the time. If we were to tell your father all of that, the conversation would've been perhaps productive, but there would've been a cost. I don't know what exactly. But in my experience, when I really get into the weeds about race, it makes all the white people uncomfortable, even threatened. If I had this conversation then, in my estimation, the mood would've been killed. The illusion that everyone in this country enjoys would've been shattered and you and your dad would've been brought down to the sobering reality that I live. I didn't want to do that. I stay with you because when I'm alone with you, watching

a movie or walking through the woods by your house, I get to be in that illusion for even a few hours. I forget about Trayvon, or the white clad terrorists that are revered as patriots; or the fact that, down the street from my house, there are kids like me who are abused, forgotten and left for dead by this country. I forget about the one hundred different times I've been called a nigger and the one-hundred different ways my childhood tormenters found a way to articulate that "fact." I forget all the things I've heard about me or my people that made my blood boil and my mind fantasize about the breaking of necks and the crushing of throats. When we are alone, it is just you and me. All the inherited problems that plague our generation fade away. Perhaps this escapism is selfish, but I really couldn't care.

But like most modes of escape, it isn't permanent. This is where your aunt comes in. See, all that fear I feel when I don a hoodie is arguably unsubstantiated. I have never personally been stopped by the police. That one time I was lost in the white neighborhood, the white people there were polite and pointed me to the house I was looking for. For every one of my peers who belittled me, there is a well-intentioned one who respects me as an individual. What's fucked up is that I almost wish this wasn't true. Because every example of white people treating me right feeds into the narrative of the illusion, that everything is fine. If I were to be stopped by a cop, I could at least say, "I told you so," to all the skeptics. I wouldn't have to recite dozens of statistics and examples to prove that I'm not crazy. Rather, my personal example would suffice. But that's not the way things work here in the Northeast. Outright racism is uncouth so people bury it in a shallow grave of coded language and excuses. That way all the well-meaning liberals who watched *Black Panther*, voted for Obama, and read their de rigueur Ta-Nehisi Coates can gentrify with an intact conscious. So, when your aunt gave me that look, I was actually surprised. As I said, such blatant hostility is uncommon in the liberal bubble I seem to always be trapped in. That look was the stuff of history books, legend, a myth even. The type of thing we honor our grandparents for having to endure, but never ourselves witnessed.

I was caught off guard, but as always, I recovered. I remembered my place. I remembered what the nature of this country we call home is. The situation with your aunt shattered the intoxication I enjoyed with you. And it planted a seed of doubt. It made me question our reality. Not so much

our relationship, but rather the factors that affect it. So, when your mother makes me undo my spring break plans with you, I wonder is it because she is worried that I will sully your reputation when we are left alone or is it because of a more sinister rationale. The problem is that I will never know the answer. There is always an alternative solution to this problem. Maybe your mom is just an unreasonable and slightly insane person, a narrative that has ample evidence to support it. Maybe she just doesn't like me for some infraction that I hadn't even noticed. One can run these examples all night long, but you'll never get an answer. Any or all of them could be true. Furthermore, if one of us was to confront her, she would never admit to her *disease*. That is, if she is indeed sick.

I feel a hostility emanating from certain members of your family, and I can't put my finger as to why. Perhaps it is my own arrogance, and I will admit I am not perfect, but it honestly confuses me. I would say that for most parents, they would regard me as a good boyfriend. I am good looking and fit, but still smart and book savvy. I treat you well, but I don't arbitrarily shower you in cheap manifestations of love. I am smart, but I can still swing a hammer and turn a wrench, and while I may not be as handy as they would like, I still can (and have) helped out with the dirty jobs around your house. I am polite. I dress moderately. I refer to them as "ma'am" and "sir." I am trying. Yet it is never enough and part of me thinks that they will never truly accept me. I have begun to notice this because of the seed of doubt your aunt inadvertently planted.

Going forward, I am not asking for you to necessarily change your behavior. For you to coddle me would drive me to insanity. All that I have explained to you is really out of your control. I wrote this as a way of opening up. If we are to stay together, I need to let you in all the way. The fact that it took a college writing assignment to get me to tell you all of this is almost pitiful, but nonetheless, it needed to happen. I want you to at least be able to try and understand a little bit. I doubt that you'll read this and have some grand epiphany and suddenly feel everything I have felt in 19 years. But, I still owe it to you to explain myself. I have been lying to you and to myself for too long. It's time for me to unearth the reality and wake you up.