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Because I'm Black

It stings. The cold wind is like pinpricks on my skin, sucking the moisture out of my lips and sending shivers throughout my body. As cars pass me by on the sidewalk, I notice my teeth are past the point of chattering and my fingers are numb. I do not mind this, though, nor do I mind the gray, cloudy skies that are abnormal for Grand Prairie this early in the winter. My admission letter to MIT came in a few days ago, and absolutely nothing can kill my good mood, especially when I am walking to Friendship Park with my friends Dave and Ed. Or so I thought.

We continue to trek through the frigid air, paying no mind to it as we run through our usual banter. The topic of college comes up, as it has in previous conversations.

"Man, I still cannot believe you are going to MIT next year. How'd you manage to pull that off a year ahead of schedule?" Ed asks. Today he is wearing a thin black jacket and black jeans that complement his dark hair. His skin is noticeably paler, giving him an olive complexion, and occasionally he lets out a sniffle; despite his permanent smile and confident stride, he is just as cold as I am. Dave, on the other hand, seems impervious to the cold. He has elected to wear a purple t-shirt and cargo shorts, and is striding forward wearing his usual serious expression, signaling that he is deep in thought.

I stop to ponder Ed's question while he looks at me expectantly. Memories rush back to me: the clanging of medals won at math competitions, the yellow slip of paper containing my GPA and class rank written in blue ink, the image of myself in bed with a heap of homework assignments strewn across the bedsheet. I decide to answer with a shrug, as I usually do when people ask me this question. "AP classes, a good GPA, extracurriculars, and some well-written essays, I guess," I respond, not wanting to draw much attention to it, but still wishing to revel in the fact that I was admitted.

"And because he's black," Dave interjects with a smirk and a gleam in his eye. In an instant, time slows to the speed of molasses. Nothing else matters; the cold becomes inconsequential and the gray skies disappear as I enter the realm of my mind, where I am alone with my thoughts and the echo of the simple statement, "because he's black."

Because he's black. And with that everything I worked for is diminished to nothing.

Because he's black. And with that, everything I worked for is diminished to nothing. All the late nights I spent devoting myself to my AP classes as opposed to hanging out with friends become irrelevant. All the hours I put into striking a balance between getting good grades, dedicating myself to my extracurriculars, and maintaining an active social life are written off as wasted. It hasn't been easy. There were moments when I doubted my ability to have all three, but somehow, I managed. It was all in vain, though. Apparently, the color of my skin gave me a pass regardless of these factors.

KENNY EGBUONU



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kenny Egbunu is a member of the class of 2021 and plans to major in course 7A as a premed. He was born to Nigerian immigrants in Arlington, TX. Kenny lived in Arlington for 5 years before moving to Grand Prairie, TX (read: Dallas, TX, for people unfamiliar with Texas), where he has lived ever since. On campus, he is involved with his fraternity, Nu Delta, as well as DanceTroupe, NSBE, BSU, ASA, and the MIT BoSTEM Scholars Academy. Additionally, he is a lector for the Tech Catholic Community. He believes LeBron James is the GOAT (greatest of all time) and it's not close. He would like readers of this piece to know that tapping into his memory was the most difficult part of the writing

Because he's black. But am I, though? Both of my parents are Nigerian, and although I go by Kenny, my full name is Kenechukwu Egbuonu. The smell of my life is that of *Jollof* rice, fried plantains, *moi moi*, and salmon on Sunday afternoons. The sound of my life is that of Nigerian gospel music and the broken Igbo of the Nigerians at St. Michael's complaining about the greed, inefficiency, and corruption that plagues the Nigerian government. I describe myself as a Nigerian who was born in Texas, an African, but never black. But regardless, I am black in the eyes of Dave, which begs the question: is blackness merely a skin color, or is it a set of experiences that one goes through, or simply a state of mind that one embraces or rejects?

Because he's black. This should not be bothering me as much as it is. In fact, when I visited MIT two months ago, one of the admissions counselors I met, Latasha, explicitly warned me that people would try to use my race to diminish my accomplishments. I should expect this. So why is it so upsetting? Perhaps it is because it happened at the hands of Dave, a person whom I considered a friend. Dave, my best friend of ten years, going back to our days of playing Pokémon in third grade, and the person I have come to trust and rely on, is the one who would say something like that. Or perhaps it is because, to a certain extent, I believe it to be true. After all, MIT receives an abundance of applications from some of the brightest people in the world. What else could have set me apart from them?

In his mind, he probably believes that minorities get a free ride in college admissions, whereas he does not.

Because he's black. Does this count as racism? Dave is white. I am an African. Maybe black. Possibly both. He does not seem to be putting my race down, but the comment is racially charged. In his mind, he probably believes that minorities get a free ride in college admissions, whereas he does not. He likely believes that my admission to MIT is an inheritance of sorts, a destiny and privilege I am endowed with as a result of the melanin in my skin. That I am a beneficiary, based upon my race. Am I? I certainly do not feel like it, especially with the stories of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and other black men for whom justice was not served still fresh in my mind.

Not while I'm statistically more likely to receive a jail sentence than a diploma. Not while I face the stereotypes society

imposes upon Africans and people of African descent: that we are poor, starving criminals who lack father figures and education.

These thoughts swirl around in my mind in the span of a second. I wish I could tell Dave even one of them. I wish we could have a discussion on race and identity and common misconceptions about these matters here and now. I wish the situation could play out how I imagine it would: I would tell him that I did not get into MIT *because* I'm black, that I am not a beneficiary of my race, that to attribute my admission to my skin color was wrong. He, in turn, would consider this, welcoming my insight into the topic of race while providing his own. We would continue walking to Friendship Park with a newfound understanding of one another. But I just can't. All I manage to do is give a fake smile and say, "Hurray for affirmative action, am I right?" And it stung.

process; once that was accomplished the words started to flow.

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