

*When I was a child, my insides would crawl when my father would say, "I hate black people."*

*Sometimes, it would be when we were in his car and a vehicle would cut him off in London traffic. He'd honk the horn and glare at the culpable motorist. If the aggressor were black, he'd mutter something like: "Typical black monkey. Can't stand black people."*

*Or perhaps we'd be at a huge family gathering.*

*If a black relative slipped an undermining comment about my father, maybe a cutting joke to make others chuckle, my dad would mumble under his breath, "Black people. Always black people."*

*But today, I understand my father's words clearly.*

*I hate black people, I thought, face-to-face with a tall black man.*

The accompanying tremor from my gut that shook my insides, blazed through my head like a gust of intense summer heat, setting my cheeks on fire with shame, guilt, and nausea.

The thought and emotions are as ferocious as knowing the burning sensation on my skin when I'm too close to a bonfire.

I continued to frown at the man stood in front of me in JFK Airport Check-In.

*What's the issue now? What grief is this 'one' going to give me?*

I looked past him to the other security personnel who were smiling.

*What are 'they' up to?*

I've never vocalised my hatred for black people; I'm disgusted by the very notion of it. But anger travelled through my veins as the tall guy stared at me in a manner I could only describe as 'intending me harm.'

I mentally shook my head.

My father was raised on the island of Antigua till he was twenty-one. He left and never looked back. It didn't paint the rosier picture of the Caribbean as he was extremely thankful to live in London. But weeks before I left the City, I'd asked him, "Are black people in the Caribbean any different from black people in London?"

"Yeah," he said with a look of solidarity. "They're more relaxed."

Even though I'd been to the Caribbean before, I was aware I'd been treated with tourist hospitality; my father's confirmation was needed to suppress my fears, but seeing the airport security surrounding me provoked rage from old wounds. All of the employees were black and they were snickering at my expense.

"Stand right here," said the tall black guy in the common New York accent I'd heard on American television shows. His teeth protruded but he was well-groomed with a shaved head and the typical goatee that so many black American celebrities have. He ushered me over, not looking at me, and pointed toward a large glass box very similar to a futuristic prison I'd seen in science fiction films.

"Step inside, and sit," he said, still not acknowledging me but looking to the other two security personnel, who were grinning back at him. He handed me a red tray. "Place

all your belongings here.” I took my possessions out of the grey tray and moved them into the red tray, which he snatched without looking at me.

I walked inside the large glass box, and sat on the white bench with no back, awaiting further instruction. He closed the door behind me and walked out of sight. I was a prisoner as onlookers in the airport continued through security checks without issue, putting their bags on the conveyor belts of X-ray machines.

The glass box was sufficiently isolated from the airport security queues to be conspicuous, and large enough to accommodate five average-size adult males with space to move.

Three dark-skinned airport security men and one woman—all in their mid-20s—stood around the sides of the glass box, smiling at their co-workers.

Two of them walked up to each other and fist-bumped. The staff continued looking in on me with wry grins as if other plane passengers queueing were a zero percent security risk; as if to say, *we’ve got our guy. The rest of you are free to go.*

I retained a blank facial expression, but my anger screamed of past pains.

The tall black guy who had chosen to pull me from the queue, entered the glass box, and closed the door behind him.

Considering I’m six-foot, he was around six-foot three, a skinny build, and about my age.

“Okay!” he said with a tone that sounded like an attempt to be a Drill Instructor. “You have been selected for random screening! What I’m going to do, is search you with this!” He gestured towards his metal detector device. “I want you to sit down and lift your feet up! One at a time! Is that understood?”

I nodded and sustained my expressionless face, eyes fixed dead on his.

”Do-you-understand?” he said with increased aggression as if he was talking to an insolent child.

“Yeah,” I muttered, continuing to nod. I watched my bag get raided by the others. Their hands dug deep, turning things over, mixing things around, opening items up, sniffing them like a bunch of monkeys with new toys.

*Just got to let it happen, I thought. Let it happen.*

*I was six years old when I found out that being born with black skin was wrong.*

*In my school classroom, I sat surrounded by three of the prettiest white girls, amid twenty other pupils diligently getting on with their maths sums.*

*On my table that day, I heard words that would carve into my conscience for life.*

*“You’re black. You must be dirty,” said the blond, blue-eyed Canadian girl as she prodded my forearm. “Didn’t God clean you?”*

*With the finger she’d used to poke me, she pressed it into the table and wiped to get the filth off her.*

*Sitting in the centre of them, I looked at my skin, wondering how I could clean the dirt off my body.*

*Why would God make me so dirty?*

*“The palms of your hands are white,” the brunette girl called Jane said. “That’s a start. It’s just the rest of you. We can’t touch you as we might get some on us.”*

*“Yeah,” the other blond girl Lexi said and chuckled. Her head flicked to Jane. “Kiss him. I dare you.”*

*“No, you kiss him,” Jane replied.*

*I was the only black boy in the class. And I was one among seven in the entire Victorian-looking, Church of England primary school of two hundred and sixteen pupils. The girls had kissed the other boys in my class because they were white, but they wouldn’t touch me, because I was black...and I was dirty.*

“Stand up! Is everything out of your pockets?,” said the airport security guy.

“Yes,” I replied.

The staff outside the glass box continued to smile at each other, but didn’t make any eye contact with me.

I attempted to smile at them to share in the joke, but they kept their gaze between each other and when they met my eyes, they painted their faces with frowns.

“Now, listen to my instructions!” said the security guy, still shouting. “I want you to raise your hands up! I’m going to scan you! I then want you to take several paces forward so I scan your back, and await further instructions! Do you understand what I am saying?”

“Yes,” I mumbled.

“Excuse me?”

“Yes. Yes, I understand.”

“Good! Now raise your arms!”

I lifted my arms and let his scanner peruse my limbs and torso.

*As time moved on through my infant days, rejection from white children pushed me to seek kinship among other black kids. But this proved laughable...literally.*

*At age seven, I used to be dropped off at Battersea Park Playcentre—a place for children on school holidays from single parent households, or kids simply seeking mischief. I fell in the former category. My parents were divorced and both had to work, which meant my younger brother, younger sister and I needed supervision.*

*The playcentre bungalow—equipped with a pool table, pottery and arts room, and a lounge area—had a fierce odour that told me the boys around were older.*

*Their faces were oily with large clusters of spots—some filled with pus at the head—and they were hulking in their huge bomber jackets and duffel coats, with hoods or side-ward baseball caps.*

*Daily, the same seven black teenagers huddled in the carpeted lounge section. Perched on tattered, stained couches and love-seats, they surrounded a gaming console and television. After many days standing behind their seating arrangement, watching them play their games, I mustered the courage to ask, “How do you do a Hadouken?”*

*I had watched the powerful character Ryu fire a ball of blue energy from his hands*

shouting, "Hadouken!" in the computer game *Street Fighter II*. But in asking the question, my voice sounded out of place, like it didn't belong among the guys.

*They ignored me.*

*I was compelled to amend my mother's elocution lessons, dropping the pronunciation of consonants on my words.*

*"'ow d'you do dat?" I repeated as I saw Ryu expel a blue fire ball again.*

*"You're posh star. Push off, yeah?" one of them said and kissed his teeth. "You're not black. You sound like a little white boy."*

*"He's tryin' to be like us though, you get me," another chimed in.*

*The laughter of the whole group that followed forced the truth. I wasn't one of them, despite my dark skin colour, I wasn't 'black.'*

*One of the younger boys who was around my age, but lighter skinned with pupils that appeared colourless, tried to pick a fight, giggling and pushing me as the teenagers cheered him on.*

*"You're just a white boy in black skin star, just a little white boy in black skin," he kept repeating. "You think you're tough though, innit? D'you think you can fight star?"*

*"Get him Wayne!" the others shouted as they paused their computer game and turned around.*

*I was quick to react.*

*I didn't bother with a push. I emulated *Street Fighter* and punched him in the jaw.*

*"Ooooooh! Well done star," the other boys hollered as the kid called Wayne ran out of the bungalow crying.*

*"You sparked 'im raw blood!" another shouted. "Here, come n' play the game with us."*

*Joy shot up in me like a fountain.*

*Finally, I was welcomed in.*

*I was one of them.*

*I was black.*

*As I played the game, the other boys whispered and chuckled to each other behind me. The name Marlow kept breezing into my peripheral hearing.*

*"What's so funny?" I said, my voice still sounding out of place among their cooler, laid-back accents.*

*"Nothing star," one of them replied. "Play da game innit."*

*"Is he coming down then?" mumbled another.*

*"Yeah, any minute bruv."*

*I paused the game and turned around, sensing that all the teenagers were laughing at me.*

*The biggest of the guys I'd ever seen stepped into the playcentre. His bloodshot eyes fixed on me. He had a thick, protruding bottom lip, a large nose, wore a huge anorak and heavy boots that thudded with each step. The creases around his eyes and on his forehead told me he could have been in his 30s, maybe even 40s. He sniffed through his wrinkled nose and immediately stepped up toward me. He snatched the game controller*

*out of my hands and took a seat next to me, pushing his leg right up against mine so I felt a pinch in my thigh.*

*“What’s your name cous?” he said with his deep, lagging voice.*

*I didn’t answer.*

*“Aint you got a name cous?” he said and smiled a grin of overcrowded teeth.*

*“Listen, play the game man. Don’t be scared.”*

*He threw the spare controller into my lap and allowed me to continue playing the game. The other boys sniggered.*

*“So I hear you punched out Wayne,” he said. His tone appeared relaxed, like he approved.*

*I smiled. “Yeah, I punched him in the jaw.”*

*The other boys laughed and I joined them.*

*“Wow!” he exclaimed. “You punched him in the jaw? Well done little man. Well done.”*

*“Yeah, I punched him in the jaw,” I repeated with more pride.*

*“You tough then bro?” His voice amplified. “Innit! You’re real tough, aren’t you bro? Right? Right?”*

*I smiled. “Yeah I—”*

*He grabbed my throat, his fingers gripping in between the tendons on my neck.*

*“Listen!” he shouted so close to me I could smell the stink of his body odour and breath all at once. “Listen good! Wayne’s my bro. You get me. If a little coconut like you hits him again, you know what I’m gonna do to you little man?” He shoved his forehead against my temple. “I said! Do you know what I’m gonna do to you little man?”*

*I squinted my eyes as his hot breath struck my pupils and spittle flew across my cheeks. The shouting and grip he had on my throat made my entire body tremble.*

*“Get out of here coconut!” he bellowed. “And don’t come back or I’m gonna bang you up!”*

*A few tears leaked from my eyes as the laughter of the black boys chased me out of the playcentre.*

*“I want you to step to the side here and wait!” said the security guy, insisting on talking to me like I had a hearing disability. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”*

*“Yeah, I understand you,” I replied, looking him square in the eyes.*

*He glared like he wanted to say more, then turned away.*

*From the back of his head, I could see he was smiling at the other security personnel; his cheeks gave him away. They responded with clear grins of their own.*

*I watched as they routed through the compartments of my wallet and pulled apart my mobile phone, examining behind the battery and the SIM card holder.*

*At eight years old, Thaxton Playcentre in Hammersmith, London during school holidays introduced me to loads of black kids; a change from my predominantly white school.*

*The comments from black boys and girls never stopped.*

*“You’re too posh to be black.”*

*“You don’t dress black.”*

*“You got your hair cut by a white man.”*

*“You’re not a real black man.”*

*“You’re a coconut.”*

*One day, a black guy and girl, both massively overweight in stature and emitting the stench of puberty’s arrival, invited me to ‘be their friend.’*

*It wasn’t long before the two of them beat me up so badly, I almost blacked out.*

*The cries of my brother and sister got the playcentre coordinators’ attention, but I always wondered; why did they pick me out of all the kids they could have selected?*

*And why did they suddenly turn on me?*

*There was no warning while we discussed WWF wrestlers; it was as simple as the two of them shouting, “Now!” then using me as a practice dummy for all the wrestling moves they’d seen on Cable Television.*

*“Where are you heading?” said the tall security guy.*

*“The Pharisee Islands,” I said.*

*He nodded. “What’s the reason for your travel?”*

*“I’m heading to work out there.”*

*“What’s your occupation?”*

*“I’m going to be a bartender.”*

*He looked me in the eye, then back at the other security workers. They gripped their mouths and their cheeks puffed in restraint. Likely because they wanted me to know that I was the butt of their joke.*

*I kept my face blank and unreadable.*

*At my local church Sunday School, two black boys—twin brothers—branded me with a name I’d heard many times already; a label that I’d become further familiar with in my teenage years and early twenties.*

*“You’re a coconut!” they exclaimed one day with a laughter that conceived unease. This came with no reasoning. It was said as randomly as a Russian Roulette gunshot to the head.*

*For plenty of Sundays after, it was my title.*

*What did it mean?*

*Why was I a coconut?*

*All I knew was that it was intended to hurt me, because of the laughter that would ensue afterwards.*

*At my secondary school—a prestigious, huge red-brick private establishment for boys—four black guys in my year had taken to hurling insults at me daily.*

*I’d achieved a government paid-place to attend because my parents could never afford the fees, but because of the way I spoke, these black boys called me “posh” and*

“rich.”

*They would specifically joke about my haircuts; I never shaved my head as low as they did and they found this hilarious, branding me with that name—coconut. The title evolved to Bounty like the chocolate, leaving me even more baffled about these names.*

*Ahmed Joseph, Jethro Godric-Beck, Jayden Ennin, and Marlon Noel couldn't hold the joke private for long.*

*I was thirteen when they explained it amid hyena-pack laughter on the school grounds.*

*The four of them paused, holding their faces to control their chuckling.*

*Jethro put his hand on my shoulder. “You're black on the outside and white on the inside, innit,” he said with a mock-sympathetic tone before the group of them burst into further fits of laughter; so that's what it meant.*

*While in a Religious Studies class, as the teacher turned his back to write on the board, I asked Ahmed and Marlon about Jethro, who seemed to detest me even more than the others did.*

*“Can't we all just get along?” I whispered to them at my side. “I mean, why does Jethro do it? Why does he keep bothering me all the time? I never did anything to him.”*

*I was met with an impossible answer; a titanium wall where you're sealed in on all sides to endure, and die.*

*“Jethro just hates you,” said Ahmed.*

*They smiled and then released a torrent of chuckling.*

*For six years, they would continue ripping on me—mainly for my haircuts, the way I spoke, and for not being 'black' enough.*

*At fifteen years old, a holiday on an American cruise liner in Florida—a one-off surprise vacation that my mother had spent years saving up for to surprise us—showed there was no international exemption; black people in the States were just the same.*

*Making friends with a group of guys on the ship, two guys within the group interrogated me about 'chatting-up' girls as we sat in the lobby of the opulent-looking cruise-liner.*

*I had no confidence in myself...none at all. I didn't know how to talk to girls, but that offered me no mercy.*

*“Where's your game England?” two of the guys said. “Where's your game?”*

*They'd nicknamed me England because of my voice. Pointing at me and referencing the fact that I didn't know how to talk to girls, they began to go around the circle of guys present.*

*“Don's got game. Eric's got game. Rick's got game. Even your little brother's got game. But where's your game England? Where's your game?”*

*All the guys were black, Rick was English, and my brother had managed to dodge the assault. So what made me special? Really? What? Why did they choose me? What had I done to draw this attention?*

*When I was sixteen, sat in the sauna of my local sports centre, a twenty-two year old Brazilian bodybuilder said something that provoked both my disgust and agreement at*

*the same time. “I like black people, but I can’t stand—” He used the word that colonial masters had utilised to keep their slaves in check. The same word unnecessarily proclaimed by Hip-Hop artists in abundance.*

*“What?” I replied in surprise.*

*“He means black people that act out aggressive, rude, and ignorant,” said a black lady sat in the room with us.*

*On another occasion in the sauna, an Indian woman said to me, “I knew you were different. When I saw you, I knew you were not like them. I could tell.”*

*I was aware of exactly what she meant. There was a clear stereotype of what London black youth were, stemming from American Hip Hop culture. Black guys were tagged as rough and ready, uneducated and proud of it, dressing to represent ghetto-life with chains and over-sized basketball shirts, speaking slang with arrogance, and gladly disrespecting women. I didn’t match.*

*At nineteen, an incident with a guy called Mattox at my sports centre left me seething for years. I’d exercised and trained in martial arts so that if a physical altercation ever occurred with one of these specific types of aggressors—namely a black guy giving me grief for no apparent reason—I would be able to handle myself. With Mattox, I was given a chance to prove what I’d learnt.*

*Mattox, a twenty-four year old who was as dark as charcoal, regularly approached me in the gym.*

*“You’re getting big bro,” he said as he pressed and caressed my arms. “Yeah, real big bro,” he continued.*

*“Thanks Mattox,” I said, letting my eyes recede. His voice was eerily light and didn’t match the well-defined, muscular build he had. He was slightly shorter than me, but nothing could have prepared me for his ‘other persona.’*

*He invited me to an underground nightclub in Soho.*

*When we met up, he seemed different.*

*His friends—five other black guys—seemed miserable and unfriendly, as did he.*

*After twenty minutes, I left the nightclub feeling totally unwelcome and despised by his friends as they had not even been able to greet me, let alone speak to me. I’d tried to speak to Mattox about the gym and training, but he seemed completely out of it.*

*A few days later, I saw him in the sports centre as I was leaving the changing rooms.*

*“We need to talk,” he said sternly.*

*I returned his firm tone. “Yeah. We do.”*

*The following day, after my regular gym workout, I got changed into my swim-trunks and entered the steam room, lying down on the bench. Minutes passed and the door was opened wide with force.*

*“So that’s how it is, is it?” said Mattox as he stormed in. “No love for Mattox!”*

*“No. It’s not like that at all,” I calmly replied, still lying down.*

*“So, what’s happening then bro?” He plonked himself down on the bench in front of me.*

*“Nothing.”*

*“You gotta understand. The way I am outside and the way I am in the gym, it’s different. Those are my boys from the streets, you get me? When I’m in the gym, it’s the gym, but when I’m on the streets, it’s business, you get me?”*

*“I don’t get it Mattox. I don’t get it at all.”*

*“You were showing me too much love and too much respect in the club bro. Can’t be going on like that with my boys. I’m a different guy when I’m out there. It’s business bro.”*

*“Sorry Mattox. I don’t get it. I was glad to see you. I don’t understand how that’s showing too much love and too much respect. You’re not making any sense.”*

*“Okay. Listen bro. Let’s squash this before it turns into a beef, yeah? You did me wrong. I did you wrong. Let’s squash this. You say sorry for what you did, and I say sorry for what I did.”*

*“What?” I replied.*

*Had this guy lost his mind? Was I missing something here? What had I done? It’s not like I’d gotten drunk and forgotten. The club atmosphere had been so hostile that I didn’t want to drink or stay.*

*“That’s crazy,” I continued. “Let’s just leave it, okay?”*

*I got up, left the steam room, and sat down on the lowest level inside the sauna room. Seconds later, Mattox burst in.*

*“Don’t go on like a pussy!” he said as he took a seat at the top level of the sauna.*

*“I don’t want to talk about this.”*

*“Look at you, puffing your chest like you’re Superman.”*

*“Mattox, I’m not puffing my chest like I’m Superman.”*

*“Look! I tell you what, you wanna squash this? We’ll finish it outside!”*

*“What?” I stared at him. “What do you mean outside?”*

*“Outside blood!” he shouted and then quietened his voice, putting his hands up as if telling an invisible friend to behave. “I just wanna talk to you outside,” he said very calmly.*

*“What do you mean talk outside?”*

*“I mean talk outside. You and I need to squash this beef like men. Or do you think you’re better than me? Too much to talk to me outside? Can’t give me that time?”*

*My mouth hung open in sheer shock. “Have you lost your mind mate?”*

*“What? Look, we’re gonna talk outside now, come on.” He stepped down from the top level.*

*“I don’t want to talk to you.”*

*I left the sauna and Mattox followed me out, putting his hand on my shoulder.*

*“Let’s step outside, come on. We’re just gonna talk, that’s all.”*

*I shook his hand from my shoulder. “Okay. Fine. Let’s talk.”*

*“Yeah, we’re just gonna talk, just gonna talk.” He was shaking his head around as if loosening his neck, ready for exercise.*

*In our swim-trunks, we both stepped out of the changing rooms into the the corridor of the centre, and parked ourselves in a small alcove where nobody was around.*

*Mattox reached his hand out and grabbed me by the throat.*

*“Now listen here and listen good,” he said. “Who are you to talk to me like this? D’you think you’re bad? I should clock you in the jaw right now you know.”*

*“You’ve gone mad mate,” I said as I wrestled his hand from my neck. “You’ve gone absolutely insane.”*

*“Yeah? Yeah? What? You think I’m mad? You think I’m mad? You think your some kind of Superman, with your big chest.”*

*Two young, average-built passersby intervened. “Break it up lads!” the guys said.*

*I walked back toward the changing rooms and Mattox, who broke free of the guys’ hold, gave chase, running up and punching me in the chest. The bystanders watched in surprise.*

*I stood firm, feeling his frustration breathing off as I towered above him.*

*“Hm,” I mumbled. His punch had felt like a tap.*

*“What? You think you’re a big man, do you? Do you? Do you?”*

*Walking back into the changing rooms, I shook my head as I retrieved my bag from the locker, ready to get changed and leave.*

*He followed after me and slapped my face. “Think you’re still bad bro? Watch how I get my boys down here! They be punching bag day n’ night blood! They will bang you up!” he shouted and sped toward his own locker.*

*“Wow...that’s strike two,” I muttered.*

*“Strike two?” he screamed. “Strike two?”*

*He dashed his sweat-drenched gym vest toward me and I dodged, pitching my locker key in his direction.*

*He rushed at me. I squared my stance and raised my fists.*

*He wrapped his arms around the backs of my legs, trying to lift me off the ground, unable to do so.*

*I saw my chance; a few seconds of slow motion as if my decision would be a life-changing event; drop an elbow clean in the spinal cord of his back and put him out quickly. But I knew in those seconds, if I did it, he would come back with his boys, and possibly with a knife. He was the type. The thoughts went through my head fast. I decided to take a fall.*

*He stood over me. “There! You see! Who’s the man? Who’s the man? You’re nothing but a little pussy. You ain’t no real black man. You’re nothing! But you think you’re all that with your big chest. You’re nothing!”*

*He got changed and was shouting loud as bystanders witnessed. “Outside! I’m gonna get you outside! We’re gonna finish this!”*

*I phoned my mother to pick me up.*

*He wasn’t waiting for me outside and I never saw him again.*

*I heard he was banned from my sports-centre, but the situation left an echo in my mind for life: “you ain’t no real black man.”*

*For years after, I dwelt on it. What if I’d just dropped an elbow in the centre of his back for all the scumbag black guys that had given me grief over the years?*

*What if?*

*In the same year, I had one of the best dates of my life with a beautiful girl from Spain. I'd shown her around Central London, seen an outdoor film at Embankment, rode the London Eye, and gone dancing at a trendy bar. It was the closest thing I'd felt to love in my life.*

*On the night bus journey returning home, we went upstairs and sat at the back.*

*Two men in their forties climbed to the top floor of the bus. A black guy and a white guy with beer bottles in their hands. The black guy spotted me. I recognised those harmful eyes; eyes that whispered to me what was coming next.*

*The black guy took the lead and stormed to the back of the empty bus to sit next to us, goading me, asking me questions about my origins, saying I wasn't good enough for the girl I was with.*

*"You think you're nice though, don't you?" said the black guy. "Think you're all that."*

*The white guy wasn't paying attention and my father's words resonated in my mind. "Black people. Always black people."*

*I would find that other black people in my life couldn't stand me; at night clubs and bars, walking the street past a group of black guys—something would be said, perhaps a little laughter, or worse, a full blown confrontation. It was a certainty.*

*Black girls said similar comments about me.*

*"Coconut."*

*"Bounty."*

*"You're not black."*

*And they went further making the assumption, "you only go for white women." Not a question. A statement. It destroyed my attraction to them.*

*In university, a Caucasian housemate who'd been raised in the English countryside said to her friends with me standing there, "We don't see you as black. Do we?"*

*Other girls of various races had said, "I don't usually find black men attractive, but there's something different about you."*

*None of this was good. Not a single bit of it.*

*I was an outsider to black people, my race. And the gap was filled with hate.*

The tall guy left and he sent the female security staff member into the glass box. All of them were still giggling.

"Okay sir, are you alright?" she said.

"Yep, have to be, right?"

"So where are you travelling to?"

"The Pharisee Islands."

"Oh that sounds nice. If you could please replace everything in your bag, you're free to go."

"Sure," I said. I stepped out the glass box and walked towards a table where my bag and belongings were strewn. I began putting my items back in my bag and pockets.

“Are you okay?” she said.

“Yeah, of course,” I replied. “I feel like I've been abused, but that's all.”

She laughed. The tall guy did not.

“Maybe lightly verbally abused,” she said.

”Yeah. I understand it's procedure though, so I'm okay. But, I do have to ask one thing. This isn't random, is it?”

She smiled. “We have to tell everyone they're random.”

“Please, just be honest. It isn't, is it?”

“Well, it's not because your black if that's—”

“No, no, no,” I said. “That's not what I'm thinking.”

“Oh, that's what most black men say when they get called in.”

“No. In fact, I was wondering if maybe it was because I'm wearing this suit.”

“Why would it be because your wearing a suit? I think you look good. You're very well dressed.”

“Thanks, I just thought maybe I'm considered a drug dealer or something.”

She laughed. “Well, you're the best dressed drug dealer I've seen. What's a handsome guy like yourself travelling alone for anyway?”

I grinned.

“See, that's better,” she said. “You have a really nice smile. “Next time, try not to be so serious. It isn't random, but I can't tell you the criteria. I'm not authorised. Sorry.”

“That's understandable,” I replied. “At least you're honest.”

I picked up my bag. “Thanks very much,” I said, addressing her. “And thank you,” I added, looking the tall guy in the eye.

He nodded, maintaining a serious face, then turned back to his friends to laugh.

She looked at my passport again and handed it back. “Thank you very much for your cooperation Christopher Charles,” she said with a grin.

“Thank you,” I said.

I walked through into the waiting area for my next flight to San Juan and shoved the bitterness from my mind.

*I'm going to the Caribbean, I thought. Paradise. Things are going to be much better. Black people will be nicer and more relaxed there. There's nothing to worry about.*