

Are you doing it for your family?

“Are you here for your family? Trying to get them PR? Cause they must be struggling right?”

Angel, a 19-year-old tattoo artist, asked me at my friend’s housewarming party when I mentioned I was Ugandan.

The smell of Marijuana and cheap beer clung to the air and filled my nostrils as I mulled over her question ; the buzz of conversation and laughter failing to drown out the intrusive thoughts I had worked so hard to keep at bay since I arrived in January. I had starved these thoughts until they were nothing but pellets, yet still, I felt them rattling around the back of my skull, taunting me with their newly-acquired immortality. They were feeding on Angel’s question...nourishing themselves in preparation for a full-frontal attack.

In the background, Kendrick Lamar’s “King Kunta” played on a loop.

“King Kunta, everybody wanna cut the legs off him...Kunta, black man taking no losses!” Kendrick shouted into the mic, emanating bravado, charisma and tenacity. He had made it. He’d taken on the white man’s world without sacrificing his blackness and won.

“Irony,” I thought as I looked around the room and registered that I was the only black man in it. In my mind’s eye, I could see Kendrick laughing at the answer I was about to give. I could see him cackling at my persistent attempts to accommodate...to fit.

“Nah bro, I’m jus’ tryna get my degree,” I responded two minutes later in a Canadian adjacent accent, a fake smile plastered on my face. I chided myself after for the code switch, but at least she didn’t ask me to repeat myself.

“How can you afford it?” She asked innocently, her big brown eyes staring intently into mine as though trying to see through them a memory of me scavenging for food on the side of the road with a loincloth around my waist and leaves in my hair.

“Haha, how can I, indeed?” I responded, smiling, working furiously to assuage my growing desire to throw my drink in her face before turning her attention towards her friend, who was limp and unmoving on the seat next to me.

Angel wasn’t a racist. She was just ignorant. But at that moment, I realized that my own bubble of self-imposed ignorance had been pierced. At that moment, the pellets grew into boulders.

I swore I’d never write, think or talk about racism. I watched Rick and Morty ridicule the concept and swore to myself that I’d rise above it all. I shielded myself with ignorance because I believed it would allow me to assimilate better. I thought it would keep my thoughts clear...turn the bewildered looks I received from white people wherever I go into adoring glances from fans invested in my killer style. I thought it would make me more interesting...more *palatable*...a pillar of intelligence. I thought it would save me from drowning in a sadness I couldn’t even begin to navigate through or understand. “I’m a Young African Man,” I repeated to myself. “These aren’t *your* problems,” I said to myself as I

apologized to the guy my friends admonished after he asked to touch my dreadlocks at the bonfire behind Academy Hill.

God knows I didn't want them to be my problems.

God knows I don't want them to be my problems.

But they became mine when the car I was passing by on my way back from The Well chirped and locked when I was the only one walking down the road. They became mine when someone I had talked to three times and planned to go skiing with, clutched his bag closer to his chest as he passed by me on the bridge connecting the university to the residential hill behind it. They became mine when a waitress at Earl's mistook me for my much shorter, hatless friend.

They've burrowed deep. They've rooted themselves in my subconscious, festered and are growing into monstrous behemoths with agency eclipsing my own. They make me wonder whether the people I talk to in class will be the same people crossing the street to get away from me when they see me running up the hill and don't recognize me. They make me wonder whether white boys my age worry about making people they're passing by on their walks uncomfortable. They make me wonder whether my professors actively support and praise me because of the colour of my skin rather than the quality of my work.

They *make* me.

The problems I worked so hard to avoid thinking about are now my rulers. I see them now, staring back intently at me as I look in the mirror, goading me into pleading with them for a reprieve...one I know will only be granted if I sacrifice everything I've done to reach this point *and leave*.

“How did you become this person?” I whisper into it, mourning for my bubble...wishing guiltily for the ease that accompanied my indifference.