What It Felt Like to Be a 'Suspicious' Black Teenager

Ferguson reminds a Journal reporter of times in his youth when he was singled out by police

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As one of the few black male reporters at The Journal, I've had experiences over the years that are unknown among my white colleagues, though anything but unique among other black men. We've all had our encounters; we've all been in situations where being black becomes synonymous with being suspicious, where demanding rights and respectful treatment can be seen as resisting law enforcement.

So after the grand jury's decision on Monday not to indict police officer Darren Wilson in the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., I found myself thinking back on episodes in my own life. My first thought was: What's the difference between a 6-foot-3-inch, 230-pound, black 17-year-old and a 40ish, 5-foot-6-inch black man? Depending on the circumstances, I knew, not much.

It was the late 1970s, and I was that large, 17-year-old, high-school kid—getting good grades and college-bound. I was walking home from Bowlero, a bowling alley in Alexandria, La., on a beautiful Saturday afternoon. I was carrying my bowling bag, complete with a 16-pound ball, shoes and a towel.

I noticed police cars speeding around. Several passed before a Louisiana state trooper stopped. He told me to be careful: There had been a fatal shooting in my neighborhood, and the suspect—a 5-foot-6-inch black man—had escaped on a bicycle. I walked on until I heard a screech of brakes and looked back. A Rapides Parish sheriff's deputy—Louisiana has parishes, not counties—got out, crouched behind his car door and pointed his .357-Magnum at me over the top of the door. When you're on the wrong end of it, the barrel of a .357 looks exactly like a tunnel to eternity.

I knew a few things instinctively: Don't run, don't move, don't argue, and above all, don't ask why I'd been stopped. Stay calm to live, I thought. The cop had the gun, but it was my responsibility not to do anything to push him to use lethal force against me.

"Turn around real slow," he said. That's just what I did. I asked if it was OK to put down the bowling bag, slowly. I knew I had to do everything I could not to create any fear in the officer. Dead but innocent is still dead.

I said little, even as the deputy pushed me down on the hood of his car and handcuffed me.

I was saved when the state trooper who had first stopped me drove back by. He ripped into the deputy, asking him questions, and I answered—which, in another situation, could have been a comedy routine. Does this kid look 5-6? I answered, I'm 6-3. Does this kid look 40? I'm 17. Does this kid look 150 pounds? I'm 230.

The trooper ran through several descriptors for the suspect. I matched just one of them. I asked, "Outside of the basic black,

is there any part of the description I fit?"

"Don't get smart, boy," the deputy hollered. But the trooper, who also was white, ended the discussion. He was livid. I thank God for him.

Years later, there is still no doubt in my mind that if I had moved in any way that frightened or angered the deputy, he would have shot me, and a reason would have been found to justify it.

As a teenager, there were other times when I was seen as "suspicious." Once, a store manager hid outside the supply freezers at a fast-food restaurant where I worked. At first, I thought he was playing a prank to scare me; only later did I learn that he suspected the black employees of stealing boxes of hamburger patties. In fact, the kids from affluent white families were taking the burgers and having cookouts with their friends. I wasn't one of the invitees. My future was worth more to me than a box of hamburger meat—even when I was a teenager.

I found myself a target of suspicion on other occasions too. At the state junior bowling tournament in Baton Rouge in 1979, a group of my teammates set about trashing the hotel—drinking, shouting and running the halls. I knew beforehand that they were likely to misbehave, so I got a room to myself on the other side of the hotel.

But that didn't stop hotel security, accompanied by a city police officer, from coming to my room first. They flashed their badges and entered, only to see textbooks laid out on the bed. I was studying for tests on Monday. I was the only minority kid on the team. To my knowledge, none of my teammates got the

same official attention.

As a teenager, I could be a doofus, but I knew even then that my margin for error was nonexistent compared with that of my friends and co-workers. On a perfectly beautiful day, I could be suspicious enough to a police officer that I would end up on the wrong end of a gun barrel.

For many black men in America, that margin of error has not improved. I don't condone the rioting in Ferguson, but it might help if the rest of the country had some small sense of the frustration and anger that this situation continues to cause.