

“You’re on Your Own, Son,” My Father Said, “This is the United States.”

Ronal Cadogan



Growing up in Barbados, I didn’t think much about race. I had seen white people living in the big houses and I had a friend who was white. We played together, fished together, and ate together in his house. He never was bad to me. My mother and grandmother taught me to love God first. They said, “The color of your skin does not matter. Only love in your heart matters.”

When I came to the United States, I began to look at things differently. My first experience with race was in Hartford, Connecticut. As I entered my apartment building, two white men approached

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me and pushed me up against the wall. They said, “Don’t move or we’ll beat you.” My father was expecting me to come home, and when I didn’t, he

came to rescue me. This was the one time that he intervened to help me. After that, he said, “You’re on your own, son. This is the United States.”

As a young black immigrant, I had a heavy accent. I wore dreadlocks and carried a backpack as I walked to school, to my job, and then home. The police did so many bad things to me. They said hurtful things to me, pushed me up against a car, put guns in my face, handcuffed me, and pushed me into a police car. The worst thing they did was when they told me they could beat me and ship me back to where I came from. After that, I wanted to return to Barbados. I didn’t want to be in the United States any longer.

I continued to be harassed in different situations until I was in my early thirties. At that time, I was fortunate to have two jobs and two white

bosses who told me how I could avoid this kind of treatment. One gave me extra hours of work to keep me off the streets. He explained to me how the issue of race had been going on since the years of slavery in the South. He told me that the more I occupied my time, the less frequent the incidents would be. My other boss told me to change my appearance, so I cut my dreadlocks, bought different clothes, became clean-shaven, and started to blend in with my co-workers.

About six months after my transformation, I was walking to work early in the morning. One of the cops who had stopped me in the past rolled up beside me and stared at me. I stared at him and he drove off without a word. I knew I was on the right track.

In Barbados I learned that if you cut your skin and I cut mine, we both bleed red. However, in the United States I learned through violence that it is all about appearance.

Race is a huge issue and in order to avoid discrimination, I had to lose my individuality. Do I like it? Absolutely not! Is it worth it? Yes – if I want my own children

to blend in and not experience the prejudice and humiliation that I went through as a young man.

My boss told me to change my appearance, so I cut my dreadlocks

AFTER YOU READ: Summarize the change Ronal describes in this essay. What do you think about it?

Ronal Cadogan is a student at Read to Succeed Adult Literacy Clinic in Hartford, CT. He came to CT from the beautiful island of Barbados almost 27 years ago when he was given the opportunity to get to know his dad. Ronal is the father of four children and enjoys reading the Bible daily.