

BUT WHAT ABOUT ME?

Scene: *A classroom at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside.*

PROFESSOR

Okay. class. Today we are going to talk a little bit about the Sandra Bland case and why it was so memorable.

STUDENT 1

I've never heard about her. What happened?

PROFESSOR

Sandra was a 28-year-old African American female, who got into an altercation with a white male officer. She was being trailed by the officer for quite some time before she was pulled over for a minor traffic violation. The situation quickly escalated, and he got aggressive with her. This was a case of racial profiling. The body cam of the officer shows him saying that he will tase her and drag her out of the car if she doesn't put her cigarette out. She was arrested and later found dead in her cell from an apparent suicide.

STUDENT 1

Wow that's a tragedy. Racial profiling is such a problem in the United States... among other things.

STUDENT 2

Yeah, that's true. What do you think would have happened if she was white?

The classroom begins to buzz with discussion.

MIKE (Inner Voice)

I've been through the same things that she has been through. I grew up surrounded by black people. We lived in the same place! I saw police brutality all the time! I have been through the exact same struggles as them!

Mike decides to speak up. He raises his hand.

MIKE

Why is it always about color with these cases? You can't make the assumption this happened just because she's black, when it could have happened to anyone - even me.

The focus of the class turns to Mike.

MIKE

I grew up in the same places as Black people and I've been harassed by the cops because of the way I look and the car that I was driving. If I got pulled over, the same thing could have happened to me. I've been profiled before.

A puzzled look begins to show on the faces of other students.

The classroom freezes, except for MIKE, who remembers a time when he was stopped for a traffic violation.

OFFICER

Do you know why I have pulled you over today, sir?

MIKE

No.

OFFICER

You seem irritated. Are you all right?

MIKE

I'm confused as to why I'm getting a ticket; you were trailing me, and I pulled over to get out of your way.

OFFICER

You failed to signal when you pulled over, sir. Would you mind putting that cigarette out?

MIKE

This is my car. I don't need to put out my cigarette. Can I have the ticket so I can leave?

The officer hands him the ticket to sign.

The traffic scene dissolves, and the classroom comes to life again.

Mike continues to address the class.

MIKE

I've struggled just the way she did but I still can't even say the N word! We're the same. I should be able to say it if I want to!

The puzzled looks turn to shock as if the other students can't process what they just heard.

One of them speaks up.

MICHELLE

Ummmm your experiences might be similar, but they are far from the same. Just because you grew up in the same places and have experienced some of the same things does not give you the

right to say something like that. Dating back to the 1600's, the "N" word was used by white men to refer to their African American slaves. Kehinde Andrews, a professor at Birmingham City University who focuses on Black Studies, once made a great point that the "N" word ties into the idea that black people aren't really human beings, but animals. We were bought and sold and didn't have any rights. Therefore, when I hear a white person say it today, it makes me feel inhuman, less-than. It is a painful reminder of the power imbalance that still exists today.

MIKE

That was hundreds of years ago! You people have rights now! How hard is it to get over it?

MICHELLE

We may have gained rights, but there is still extreme injustice and inequality. That policeman using excessive force on Sandra Bland was an example of systemic racism that manifests into institutional racism, such as criminal justice. I relate to Sandra Bland because I do not trust cops, because I am aware of their internalized racism. Put yourself in my shoes, Mike. What if I was a victim of police brutality? *What if that was me?*

MIKE

Just because you're a Black woman, doesn't mean you experience the same struggles as someone like Sandra Bland.

MICHELLE

Just because you live in a black community doesn't mean you have the right to say the "N" word.

DEVIN (Inner Voice)

This guy must be kidding right now! He can't think that just because he grew up around black people he can be so entitled.

MIKE

You don't get it! We *are* the same! I should be able to say it! And if I got pulled over like Sandra, the same thing could have happened to me. It's not always about skin color.

The class is silent now, just looking at the student.

DEVIN

You might have grown up AROUND black people, but at the end of the day you AREN'T black.

The moment intensifies.

DEVIN

You don't have to worry about your life the moment a cop sets their sights on you. You don't get approached by police with their hands already holstered on their guns because they assume your skin color automatically makes you a threat.

MICHELLE

And, you're not Black so you don't get to say that word. End of story. I'm not sure how you came to that kind of conclusion just because of where you grew up. I have Hispanic people in my life that are like family, but you won't hear me throwing around racial slurs used against them.

MIKE

I am tired of this! You just don't understand what I have been through!

Mike storms out and slams the door behind him.

The class sits in amazement at the scene that has just unfolded.