

I fit the description....

By Steve Locke

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This is what I wore to work today. On my way to get a burrito before work, I was detained by the police.

I noticed the police car in the public lot behind Centre Street. As I was walking away from my car, the cruiser followed me. I walked down Centre Street and was about to cross over to the burrito place and the officer got out of the car.

"Hey my man," he said.

He unsnapped the holster of his gun.

I took my hands out of my pockets.

"Yes?" I said.

"Where you coming from?"

"Home."

Where's home?"

"Dedham."

How'd you get here?"

"I drove."

He was next to me now. Two other police cars pulled up. I was standing in front of the bank across the street from the burrito place. I was going to get lunch before I taught my 1:30 class. There were cops all around me.

I said nothing. I looked at the officer who addressed me. He was white, stocky, bearded.

"You weren't over there, were you?" He pointed down Centre Street toward Hyde Square.

"No. I came from Dedham."

"What's your address?"

I told him.

"We had someone matching your description just try to break into a woman's house."

A second police officer stood next to me; white, tall, bearded. Two police cruisers passed and would continue to circle the block for the 35 minutes I was standing across the street from the burrito place.

"You fit the description," the officer said. "Black male, knit hat, puffy coat. Do you have identification."

"It's in my wallet. May I reach into my pocket and get my wallet?"

"Yeah."

I handed him my license. I told him it did not have my current address. He walked over to a police car. The other cop, taller, wearing sunglasses, told me that I fit the description of someone who broke into a woman's house. Right down to the knit cap.

Barbara Sullivan made a knit cap for me. She knitted it in pinks and browns and blues and oranges and lime green. No one has a hat like this. It doesn't fit any description that anyone would have. I looked at the second cop. I clasped my hands in front of me to stop them from shaking.

"For the record," I said to the second cop, "I'm not a criminal. I'm a college professor." I was wearing my faculty ID around my neck, clearly visible with my photo.

"You fit the description so we just have to check it out." The first cop returned and handed me my license.

"We have the victim and we need her to take a look at you to see if you are the person."

It was at this moment that I knew that I was probably going to die. I am not being dramatic when I say this. I was not going to get into a police car. I was not going to present myself to some victim. I was not going to let someone tell the cops that I was not guilty when I already told them that I had nothing to do with any robbery. I was not going to let them take me anywhere because if they did, the chance I was going to be accused of something I did not do rose exponentially. I knew this in my heart. I was not going anywhere with these cops and I was not going to let some white woman decide whether or not I was a criminal, especially after I told them that I was not a criminal. This meant that I was going to resist arrest. This meant that I was not going to let the police put their hands on me.

If you are wondering why people don't go with the police, I hope this explains it for you.

Something weird happens when you are on the street being detained by the police. People look at you like you are a criminal. The police are detaining you so clearly you must have done something, otherwise they wouldn't have you. No one made eye contact with me. I was hoping that someone I knew would walk down the street or come out of one of the shops or get off the 39 bus or come out of JP Licks and say to these cops, "That's Steve Locke. What the FUCK are you detaining him for?"

The cops decided that they would bring the victim to come view me on the street. The asked me to wait. I said nothing. I stood still.

"Thanks for cooperating," the second cop said. "This is probably nothing, but it's our job and you do fit the description. 5' 11", black male. One-hundred-and-sixty pounds, but you're a little more than that. Knit hat."

A little more than 160. Thanks for that, I thought.

An older white woman walked behind me and up to the second cop. She turned and looked at me and then back at him. "You guys sure are busy today."

I noticed a black woman further down the block. She was small and concerned. She was watching what was going on. I focused on her red coat. I slowed my breathing. I looked at her from time to time.

I thought: Don't leave, sister. Please don't leave.

The first cop said, "Where do you teach?"

"Massachusetts College of Art and Design." I tugged at the lanyard that had my ID.

"How long you been teaching there?"

"Thirteen years."

We stood in silence for about 10 more minutes.

An unmarked police car pulled up. The first cop went over to talk to the driver. The driver kept looking at me as the cop spoke to him. I looked directly at the driver. He got out of the car.

"I'm Detective Cardoza. I appreciate your cooperation."

I said nothing.

"I'm sure these officers told you what is going on?"

"They did."

"Where are you coming from?"

"From my home in Dedham."

"How did you get here?"

"I drove."

"Where is your car?"

"It's in the lot behind Bukhara." I pointed up Centre Street.

"Okay," the detective said. "We're going to let you go. Do you have a car key you can show me?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm going to reach into my pocket and pull out my car key."

"Okay."

I showed him the key to my car.

The cops thanked me for my cooperation. I nodded and turned to go.

"Sorry for screwing up your lunch break," the second cop said.

I walked back toward my car, away from the burrito place. I saw the woman in red.

"Thank you," I said to her. "Thank you for staying."

"Are you ok?" She said. Her small beautiful face was lined with concern.

"Not really. I'm really shook up. And I have to get to work."

"I knew something was wrong. I was watching the whole thing. The way they are treating us now, you have to watch them. "

"I'm so grateful you were there. I kept thinking to myself, 'Don't leave, sister.' May I give you a hug?"

"Yes," she said. She held me as I shook. "Are you sure you are ok?"

"No I'm not. I'm going to have a good cry in my car. I have to go teach."

"You're at MassArt. My friend is at MassArt."

"What's your name?" She told me. I realized we were Facebook friends. I told her this.

"I'll check in with you on Facebook," she said.

I put my head down and walked to my car.

My colleague was in our shared office and she was able to calm me down. I had about 45 minutes until my class began and I had to teach. I forgot the lesson I had planned. I forgot the schedule. I couldn't think about how to do my job. I thought about the fact my word counted for nothing, they didn't believe that I wasn't a criminal. They had to find out. My word was not enough for them. My ID was not enough for them. My handmade one-of-a-kind knit hat was an object of suspicion. My Ralph Lauren quilted blazer was only a "puffy coat." That white woman could just walk up to a cop and talk about me like I was an object for regard. I wanted to go back and spit in their faces. The cops were probably deeply satisfied with how they handled the interaction, how they didn't escalate the situation, how they were respectful and polite.

I imagined sitting in the back of a police car while a white woman decides if I am a criminal or not. If I looked guilty being detained by the cops imagine how vile I become sitting in a cruiser? I knew I could not let that happen to me. I knew if that were to happen, I would be dead.

Nothing I am, nothing I do, nothing I have means anything because I fit the description.

I had to confess to my students that I was a bit out of it today and I asked them to bear with me. I had to teach.

After class I was supposed to go to the openings for First Friday. I went home.