Privileged, by Kyle Korver

Reading 1

When the police break your teammate's leg, you'd think it would wake you up a little.

When they arrest him on a New York street, throw him in jail for the night, and leave him with a season-ending injury, you'd think it would sink in. You'd think you'd know there was more to the story.

You'd think.

But nope.

I still remember my reaction when I first heard what happened to Thabo. It was 2015, late in the season. Thabo and I were teammates on the Hawks, and we'd flown into New York late after a game in Atlanta. When I woke up the next morning, our team group text was going nuts. Details were still hazy, but guys were saying, *Thabo hurt his leg? During an arrest? Wait — he spent the night in jail?!* Everyone was pretty upset and confused.

Well, almost everyone. My response was….. different. I'm embarrassed to admit it. Which is why I want to share it today.

Before I tell the rest of this story, let me just say real quick — Thabo wasn't some random teammate of mine, or some guy in the league who I knew a little bit. We'd become legitimate friends that year in our downtime. He was my go-to teammate to talk with about stuff beyond the basketball world. Politics, religion, culture, you name it — Thabo brought a perspective that wasn't typical of an NBA player. And it's easy to see why: Before we were teammates in Atlanta, the guy had played professional ball in France, Turkey and Italy. He spoke three languages! Thabo's mother was from Switzerland, and his father was from South Africa. They lived together in South Africa before Thabo was born, then left because of apartheid.

It didn't take long for me to figure out that Thabo was one of the most interesting people I'd ever been around. We respected each other. We were cool, you know? We had each other's backs.

Anyway — on the morning I found out that Thabo had been arrested, want to know what my first thought was? About my friend and teammate? My first thought was: *What was Thabo doing out at a club on a back-to-back??*

Yeah. Not, *How's he doing?* Not, *What happened during the arrest??* Not, *Something seems off with this story.* Nothing like that. Before I knew the full story, and before I'd even had the chance to talk to Thabo….. I sort of *blamed* Thabo.

I thought, *Well, if I'd been in Thabo's shoes, out at a club late at night, the police wouldn't have arrested me. Not unless I was doing something wrong.*

Cringe.

It's not like it was a conscious thought. It was pure reflex — the first thing to pop into my head.

And I was worried about him, *no doubt.*

But still. Cringe.

A few months later, a jury found Thabo not guilty on all charges. He settled with the city over the NYPD's use of force against him. And then the story just sort of….. disappeared. It fell away from the news. Thabo had surgery and went through rehab. Pretty soon, another NBA season began — and we were back on the court again.

Life went on.

But I still couldn't shake my discomfort.

I mean, I hadn't been involved in the incident. I hadn't even *been there*. So why did I feel like I'd let my friend down?

Why did I feel like I'd let myself down?

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Reading 2

A few weeks ago, something happened at a Jazz home game that brought back many of those old questions.

Maybe you saw it: We were playing against the Thunder, and Russell Westbrook and a fan in the crowd exchanged words during the game. I didn't actually see or hear what happened, and if you were following on TV or on Twitter, maybe you had a similar initial viewing of it. Then, after the game, one of our reporters asked me for my response to what had gone down between Russ and the fan. I told him I hadn't seen it — and added something like, *But you know Russ. He gets into it with the crowd a lot.*

Of course, the full story came out later that night. What actually happened was that a fan had said some really ugly things at close range to Russ. Russ had then responded. After the game, he'd said he felt the comments were racially charged.

The incident struck a nerve with our team.

In a closed-door meeting with the president of the Jazz the next day, my teammates shared stories of similar experiences they'd had — of feeling degraded in ways that went beyond acceptable heckling. One teammate talked about how his mom had called him right after the game, concerned for his safety in SLC. One teammate said the night felt like being "in a zoo." One of the guys in the meeting was Thabo — he's my teammate in Utah now. I looked over at him, and remembered his night in NYC.

Everyone was upset. I was upset — and embarrassed, too. But there was another emotion in the room that day, one that was harder to put a finger on. It was almost like….. disappointment, mixed with exhaustion. Guys were just *sick and tired* of it all.

This wasn't the first time they'd taken part in conversations about race in their NBA careers, and it wasn't the first time they'd had to address the hateful actions of others. And one big thing that got brought up a lot in the meeting was how incidents like this — they weren't only about the people directly involved. This wasn't only about Russ and some heckler. It was about more than that.

It was about what it means just to *exist* right now — as a person of color in a mostly white space.

It was about racism in America.

Before the meeting ended, I joined the team's demand for a swift response and a promise from the Jazz organization that it would address the concerns we had. I think my teammates and I all felt it was a step in the right direction.

But I don't think anyone felt satisfied.

Reading 3: Quotes

Kyle Korver Quotes:

What I'm realizing is, no matter how passionately I commit to being an ally, and no matter how unwavering my support is for NBA and WNBA players of color….. I'm still in this conversation from the privileged perspective of *opting in* to it. Which of course means that on the flip side, I could just as easily *opt out* of it. Every day, I'm given that choice — I'm granted that privilege — based on the color of my skin.

And I know I have to do better. So I'm trying to push myself further. I'm trying to ask myself what I should actually *do*. How can I — as a white man, part of this systemic problem — become part of the *solution* when it comes to racism in my workplace? In my community? In this country?

I know that, as a white man, I have to hold my fellow white men accountable. We all have to hold each other accountable. And we all have to *be* accountable — period. Not just for our own actions, but also for the ways that our inaction can create a "safe" space for toxic behavior. And I think the standard that we have to hold ourselves to, in this crucial moment …. We have to be *active*. We have to be *actively* supporting the causes of those who've been marginalized — precisely because they've been marginalized.

And I guess I've come to realize that when we talk about solutions to systemic racism — police reform, workplace diversity, affirmative action, better access to healthcare, even reparations? It's not about guilt. It's not about pointing fingers, or passing blame. It's about responsibility. It's about understanding that when we've said the word "equality," for generations, what we've really meant is equality *for a certain group of people*. It's about understanding that when we've said the word "inequality," for generations, what we've really meant is *slavery,* and its aftermath — which is still being felt to this day. It's about understanding on a fundamental level that black people and white people, they still have it different in America. And that those differences come from an ugly history….. not some random divide.

It's about understanding that Black Lives Matter, and movements like it, matter, because — well, let's face it: I probably would've been safe on the street that one night in New York. And Thabo wasn't. And I *was* safe on the court that one night in Utah. And Russell wasn't.

But as disgraceful as it is that we have to deal with *racist hecklers* in NBA arenas in 2019? The truth is, you could argue that that kind of racism is "easier" to deal with. Because at least in those cases, the racism is loud and clear. There's no ambiguity — not in the act itself, and thankfully not in the response: we throw the guy out of the building, and then we ban him for life.

But in many ways the more dangerous form of racism isn't that loud and stupid kind. It isn't the kind that announces itself when it walks into the arena. It's the quiet and subtle kind. The kind that almost hides itself in plain view. It's the person who does and says all the "right" things in public: They're perfectly friendly when they meet a person of color. They're very polite. But in private? Well….. they sort of wish that everyone would stop making everything "about race" all the time. It's the kind of racism that can seem almost invisible — which is one of the main reasons why it's allowed to persist.

But if we're really going to make a difference as a league, as a community, and as a country on this issue….. it's like I said — I just think we need to push ourselves another step further. First, by identifying that less visible, less obvious behavior as what it is: *racism*. And then second, by *denouncing* that racism — actively, and at every level. That's the bare minimum of where we have to get to, I think, if we're going to consider the NBA — or any workplace — as anything close to part of the solution in 2019.

The NBA is over 75% players of color. …. People of color, they built this league. They've grown this league. People of color have made this league into what it is today. And I guess I just wanted to say that if you can't find it in your heart to support them — *now?* And I mean actively support them? If the best that you can do for their cause is to passively "tolerate" it? If that's the standard we're going to hold ourselves to — to blend in, and opt out? Well, that's not good enough. It's not even close.

This feels like a moment to draw a line in the sand. I believe that what's happening to people of color in this country — right now, in 2019 — is wrong. The fact that black Americans are more than five times as likely to be incarcerated as white Americans *is wrong*. The fact that black Americans are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as white Americans *is wrong*. The fact that black unemployment rates nationally are double that of overall unemployment rates *is wrong*. The fact that black imprisonment rates for drug charges are almost six times higher nationally than white imprisonment rates for drug charges *is wrong*. The fact that black Americans own approximately one-tenth of the wealth that white Americans own *is wrong*. The fact that inequality is built so deeply into so many of our most trusted institutions *is wrong*.

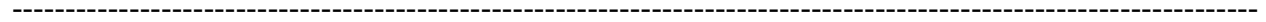---

And I don't think I have all the answers yet — but here are the ones that are starting to ring the most true:

I have to continue to educate myself on the history of racism in America.

I have to listen. I'll say it again, because it's that important. *I have to listen.*

I have to support leaders who see racial justice as fundamental — as something that's at the heart of nearly every major issue in our country today. And I have to support policies that do the same.

I have to do my best to recognize when to get out of the way — in order to amplify the voices of marginalized groups that so often get lost.

Time for me to shut up and listen.