

# THE DIFFERENCE\*

*Chadwick Sterling '10*

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Two boys leave two houses in the middle of the night.  
What is the difference?

One carelessly swings a rifle over his shoulder,  
waving at his neighbor from across a well-cut lawn.  
The other tucks something into his pocket,  
avoiding the eyes of those huddled  
in the corridor of his apartment building.  
What is the difference?

The first boy is dressed partly like a soldier,  
partly like a pioneer riding into new territory,  
those brave souls who have been around since the Birth of a Nation.  
Like his father's hero John Wayne,  
he strides to his car with purpose:  
His grandpa had fought in the war,  
a member of the greatest generation to correct the tilt of history.  
In his veins runs the blood of men and women  
who braved the wilderness of the west in the time of President Polk.  
He knew how to use the gun and he was no coward.  
What is the difference?

The second boy wears the dark colors,  
and loose-fitting garbs of a warrior,  
reminiscent of those fighters from a bygone era  
who withstood the heat of the southern sun  
and fertilized the fields with their souls.  
His grandpa too had been a soldier,  
but like the boy hiding his hand in the folds of his hoodie,  
his grandpa hid all signs of his time at war  
before taking the bus back home.  
He too knew how to use the gun and was no coward.  
What is the difference?

The first is on a mission to protect;  
He has seen the images of neighborhoods burning,  
and his grandpa taught him that was when he was most needed  
to hold the red lines drawn by those who founded this country,  
to stand up for what was right.

True, he was just a boy  
and a year too young to join the force,  
but he was also the heir to an ancient legacy,  
the same legacy that protected his young grandpa that night in '55  
When a man whistled at his daughter,  
who was then only 16,  
and it had been up to him and his friends to protect her honor  
and his own.  
What is the difference?

The other boy wants to feel safe.  
He looked out the window and saw his world on fire  
just like it had always been.  
His grandpa had taught him how to survive,  
that he had been born a suspect and needed to act like one,  
avoid eye contact when walking to the bus stop,  
carry all the answers  
even though they could be heavy,  
because to be caught without them  
was a death sentence.  
When he was young  
he did not understand,  
But then once  
His grandpa caught him playing with a plastic gun,  
grabbed him by the collar of his wrinkled white shirt,  
and with a hoarse voice  
told him about the baby-faced uncle he had never met  
who had been hanged in '55  
after he smiled at the girl in the gas station.

What is the difference?

*\*Content Warning: Racism, Death, Violence, Weapons*