

BRENT STAPLES

Brent Staples is a member of the editorial board of the *New York Times*. Born in 1951 in Chester, Pennsylvania, Staples has a BA in behavioral science from Widener University in Chester and a PhD in psychology from the University of Chicago. Before joining the *New York Times* in 1985, he worked for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the *Chicago Reader*, *Chicago* magazine, and *Down Beat* magazine. At the *Times*, Staples writes on culture, politics, reading, and special education, advocating for children with learning disabilities. He has also contributed to the *New York Times Magazine*, *New York Woman*, *Ms.*, *Harper's*, and other magazines. His memoir, *Parallel Time: Growing Up in Black and White*, appeared in 1994.

Black Men and Public Space

"Black Men and Public Space" first appeared in the December 1986 issue of *Harper's* magazine and was then published, in a slightly different version, in Staples's memoir, *Parallel Time*. To explain a recurring experience of African American men, Staples relates incidents when he has been "an avid night walker" in the urban landscape. Sometimes his only defense against others' stereotypes is to whistle.

My first victim was a woman — white, well dressed, probably in her late twenties. I came upon her late one evening on a deserted street in Hyde Park, a relatively affluent neighborhood in an otherwise mean, impoverished section of Chicago. As I swung onto the avenue behind her, there seemed to be a discreet, uninflamatory distance between us. Not so. She cast back a worried glance. To her, the youngish black man — a broad six feet two inches with a beard and billowing hair, both hands shoved into the pockets of a bulky military jacket — seemed menacingly close. After a few more quick glimpses, she picked up her pace and was soon running in earnest. Within seconds she disappeared into a cross street.

That was more than a decade ago. I was twenty-two years old, a graduate student newly arrived at the University of Chicago. It was in the echo of that terrified woman's footfalls that I first began to know the unwieldy inheritance I'd come into — the ability to alter public space in ugly ways. It was clear that she thought herself the quarry of a mugger, a rapist, or worse. Suffering about of insomnia, however, I was stalking sleep, not defenseless wayfarers. As a softy who is scarcely able to take a knife to a raw chicken — let alone hold one to a person's throat — I was surprised, embarrassed, and dismayed all at once. Her flight made me feel like an accomplice in tyranny. It also made it

Staples / Black

clear that I was indistinguishable into the area from the surrounding that followed, signified that a v. pedestrians — particularly women perceived as dangerous is a hazard a dicey situation, or crowd some where, or make an errant move after fear and weapons meet — and the always the possibility of death.

In that first year, my first away oughly familiar with the language could cross in front of a car stop think, think, think of the driver — ing down the door locks. On less tr to but never comfortable with people rather than pass me. Then there were men, doormen, bouncers, cabdrivers out troublesome individuals before I

I moved to New York nearly twenty night walker. In central Manhattan, tense one-on-one street encounters where sidewalks are narrow and sky — things can get very taut indeed.

After dark, on the warrenlike see women who fear the worst from neutral, and with their purse straps they forge ahead as though bracing to stand, of course, that the danger there are particularly vulnerable to street violence, tically overrepresented among the truths are no solace against the kind of suspect, a fearsome entity with whom

It is not altogether clear to me how without being conscious of the lethality. Perhaps it was because in Chester, I town where I came of age in the 1960s drop of gang warfare, street knifings, boys, had perhaps a half-dozen fistfights has clear sources.

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clear that I was indistinguishable from the muggers who occasionally seeped
into the area from the surrounding ghetto. That first encounter, and those
that followed, signified that a vast, unnerving gulf lay between nighttime
pedestrians — particularly women — and me. And I soon gathered that being
perceived as dangerous is a hazard in itself. I only needed to turn a corner into
a dicey situation, or crowd some frightened, armed person in a foyer some-
where, or make an errant move after being pulled over by a policeman. Where
fear and weapons meet — and they often do in urban America — there is
always the possibility of death.

In that first year, my first away from my hometown, I was to become thor-
oughly familiar with the language of fear. At dark, shadowy intersections, I
could cross in front of a car stopped at a traffic light and elicit the *thunk*,
thunk, thunk, thunk of the driver — black, white, male, or female — hammer-
ing down the door locks. On less traveled streets after dark, I grew accustomed
to but never comfortable with people crossing to the other side of the street
rather than pass me. Then there were the standard unpleasanties with police-
men, doormen, bouncers, cabdrivers, and others whose business it is to screen
out troublesome individuals *before* there is any nastiness.

I moved to New York nearly two years ago and I have remained an avid
night walker. In central Manhattan, the near-constant crowd cover minimizes
tense one-on-one street encounters. Elsewhere — in SoHo, for example,
where sidewalks are narrow and tightly spaced buildings shut out the
sky — things can get very taut indeed.

After dark, on the warrenlike streets of Brooklyn where I live, I often
see women who fear the worst from me. They seem to have set their faces on
neutral, and with their purse straps strung across their chests bandolier-style,
they forge ahead as though bracing themselves against being tackled. I under-
stand, of course, that the danger they perceive is not a hallucination. Women
are particularly vulnerable to street violence, and young black males are dras-
tically overrepresented among the perpetrators of that violence. Yet these
truths are no solace against the kind of alienation that comes of being ever the
suspect, a fearsome entity with whom pedestrians avoid making eye contact.

It is not altogether clear to me how I reached the ripe old age of twenty-two
without being conscious of the lethality nighttime pedestrians attributed to me.
Perhaps it was because in Chester, Pennsylvania, the small, angry industrial
town where I came of age in the 1960s, I was scarcely noticeable against a back-
drop of gang warfare, street knifings, and murders. I grew up one of the good
boys, had perhaps a half-dozen fistfights. In retrospect, my shyness of combat
has clear sources.

As a boy, I saw countless tough guys locked away; I have since buried
several, too. They were babies, really — a teenage cousin, a brother of twenty-

two, a childhood friend in his mid-twenties — all gone down in episodes of bravado played out in the streets. I came to doubt the virtues of intimidation early on. I chose, perhaps unconsciously, to remain a shadow — timid, but a survivor.

The fearsomeness mistakenly attributed to me in public places often has a perilous flavor. The most frightening of these confusions occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when I worked as a journalist in Chicago. One day, rushing into the office of a magazine I was writing for with a deadline story in hand, I was mistaken for a burglar. The office manager called security and, with an ad hoc posse, pursued me through the labyrinthine halls, nearly to my editor's door. I had no way of proving who I was. I could only move briskly toward the company of someone who knew me.

Another time I was on assignment for a local paper and killing time before an interview. I entered a jewelry store on the city's affluent Near North Side. The proprietor excused herself and returned with an enormous red Doberman pinscher straining at the end of a leash. She stood, the dog extended toward me, silent to my questions, her eyes bulging nearly out of her head. I took a cursory look around, nodded, and bade her good night.

Relatively speaking, however, I never fared as badly as another black male journalist. He went to nearby Waukegan, Illinois, a couple of summers ago to work on a story about a murderer who was born there. Mistaking the reporter for the killer, police officers hauled him from his car at gunpoint and but for his press credentials would probably have tried to book him. Such episodes are not uncommon. Black men trade tales like this all the time.

Over the years, I learned to smother the rage I felt at so often being taken for a criminal. Not to do so would surely have led to madness. I now take precautions to make myself less threatening. I move about with care, particularly late in the evening. I give a wide berth to nervous people on subway platforms during the wee hours, particularly when I have exchanged business clothes for jeans. If I happen to be entering a building behind some people who appear skittish, I may walk by, letting them clear the lobby before I return, so as not to seem to be following them. I have been calm and extremely congenial on those rare occasions when I've been pulled over by the police.

And on late-evening constitutionals I employ what has proved to be an excellent tension-reducing measure: I whistle melodies from Beethoven and Vivaldi and the more popular classical composers. Even steely New Yorkers hunching toward nighttime destinations seem to relax, and occasionally they even join in the tune. Virtually everybody seems to sense that a mugger wouldn't be warbling bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. It is my equivalent of the cowbell that hikers wear when they know they are in bear country.

For a reading quiz, visit [www.pearsoned.com](#)

Jour

Staples explains how he perceives himself about a time when you felt as if you changed people's attitudes or behavior. If you haven't had this experience, write to alter public space in this way. (To take to Essay" on the following page.)

Questio

1. What is the PURPOSE of this essay (Staples' African American men) will cease in the near future? Does he suggest a solution that comes of being ever the same?
2. In paragraph 5 Staples says he is "not a hallucination" they see him "is not a hallucination" he perceives himself to be dangerous? I
3. Staples says, "I chose, perhaps unconsciously, to remain a survivor" (par. 7). What are the "timid" one of them? How can you

Questions

1. The concept of altering public space since you that this phenomenon
2. Staples employs a large number of examples he avoid having the piece sour among all these examples? (Look for)
3. **OTHER METHODS** Many of Staples' NARRATIVES. The opening paragraph

Questi

1. What does the author accomplish in this line? Is the word used literally?
2. Be sure you know how to define it, unambiguous (par. 1); (7); congenial (11); constitutional