

I'm special. I must be. How else to explain my numerous police escorts? It tends to happen when I'm in fancy metal. Like the time I was driving a red Jaguar XJ12 sedan in Fairfax County, Va. A county police car pulled alongside of me. Didn't pull me over or anything. The officer, a youngish fellow with auburn hair, just sort of kept me company.

I didn't keep visual contact with the officer. No eye-to-eye stuff. That would have violated Rule One of Warren Brown's Black Citizen's Driving Guide. To wit: Some white police officers assume that you're looking for trouble when you look at them too long. Therefore, do not stare. Remain expressionless. Pay attention to the speedometer, and to the road ahead.

That tact worked—until I crossed the Fairfax County line and rolled into Arlington County, where the escort was assumed by an Arlington County police car. Some brothers and sisters might've gotten angry at that point, might've displayed some attitude. That would've been a mistake. It would've violated Rule Two: Don't get angry.

Rule Two has several premises. First, until something actually happens, until you're pulled over or something, there's nothing to get angry about. Police have the right to use the road, to drive alongside you, if they wish. Besides, it might not be a race thing. Maybe, they're just admiring your car. Second, anger is attractive to people itching to use power. It's like a sex hormone. They start rubbing their guns. Third, hell, when you're angry, you're not thinking; and when you're not thinking, you screw up.

Anyway, the Arlington officer chose to trail me rather than remain alongside of me. I liked that. I grew up in the back of segregated Louisiana. Thus, I now have a passion for being out front, even in front of a police car. Besides, I knew what the officer was doing. He was running tags—doing his mobile computer thing. Yessuh. Tryin' to figure out what this African American was doing in a fancy Jag with New Jersey manufacturer's tags.

The escort made me feel important, downright presidential, which is what I told my mother-in-law, Omadel Fowler Reed, who was riding with me.

"Why are they doing that? Why are they following you?" Moms asked about the policemen.

"It's an affirmative action thing," I said, which clearly puzzled her. So, I explained.

"Some white police officers see black people in luxury cars as being special. They think we need help. They try to stay close to us in case anything goes wrong. Look at it this way, Moms; at least, we don't have to worry about being carjacked."

Moms laughed, which relieved tension, which brings up Rule Three: When being accompanied by a police car, engage in passenger-cabin banter whenever possible—using visible, modest gesticulations whenever you can. This emotionally disarms many police officers—because it signifies that you're just a regular Joe or Josephine, and it shows clearly that you have nothing lethal in your hands.

The Arlington officer went on about his business. Moms and I went home. But things don't always work out that nicely. Sometimes, I get stopped, which happened once on the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

I was driving a yellow Corvette convertible, certainly going faster than Pennsylvania's posted 55 mile per hour speed limit, but also going a heck of a lot slower than the myriad of cars and trucks

# BLACK CITIZEN'S DRIVING GUIDE



By Warren Brown

that were passing me. I could've argued that point with the arresting officer, but that would have violated Rule Four: Avoid on-road arguments, even mild disputes, with uniformed people wearing guns. Such mouthiness can trigger violence. Not to mention, it could be used against you in court.

I politely asked the Pennsylvania officer if I was under arrest. He assured me that I was. We then exchanged information. He got my driver's license. I got his badge number. He asked me for the vehicle's registration documents, which I surrendered after asking if he was trying to establish vehicle ownership. He smirked and nodded. I smiled and waited until he ran the tags.

"You work for General Motors?," the Pennsylvania trooper asked, returning my documents.

"I'm a journalist," I said, not revealing the identity of my employer. The fellow seemed stunned. For the first time in our 15-minute interaction, he called me "Mister." He damn near apologized.

"I'm just doing my job, Mister Brown," he said. He thanked me for being polite, and then offered what I took to be well-meaning advice: "Look, he said. You've gotta do the limit in this car. You kind of stand out in this car. No offense, but you know what I mean."

Well, what the hell? Life ain't fair. And you don't have to be a genius to know that African Americans are more apt to be victims of negative action than they are beneficiaries of affirmative action. You can pout about that, which won't do you much good. Or, you can get smart. Here are some more on-the-road tips:

Police agencies nationwide swear that they don't have "suspect profiles" when it comes to stopping motorists. That's baloney. I drive nearly 35,000 miles a year all over the country. Unless "minorities" drive faster than "majorities," something's up. Truth is, some of my black and white police friends tell me, police use visual profiles. A prime example would be young, black men running I-95 North in a 1996 Nissan Pathfinder with Florida tags. Understand that courtesy, even under arrest, works in your favor. If an officer is going to verbally act out, let him or her do it, particularly if you have a witness in the car. You can use that information in court. I go even further. I don't carry a radar detector; but, particularly on long trips, I keep a good micro-cassette recorder nearby in the car.

Understand body language. Keep your hands visible when being followed. Most certainly, keep your hands visible when stopped. An officer might not be racist, but he or she might be nervous. Think.

Understand motor vehicle laws and the simple rules of jurisprudence. For example, in many jurisdictions, police officers cannot order you out of your car or search your vehicle unless he or she has declared probable cause for the action. In many instances, a warrant may be required for the search.

Don't be stupid! Corpses don't go to court. They go to the morgue. Case closed. If you feel you have been wronged, keep your case open. At point of arrest, do what is necessary to stay alive.

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