

RADICAL TEACHER

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Poetry

My First Black Friend

by Linda Vandlac Smith



STILL WE REACH FOR ONE ANOTHER BY KATE MORALES VIA JUST SEEDS OPEN ACCESS GRAPHICS COLLECTION

My First Black Friend

-for Ernest

Am I racist? I don't know, but my first black friend might, my first black friend if you don't count Fred whom I team-taught and joked around with at work before he lost his heart and transplanted elsewhere.

I attended the wedding when my first black friend married a Jewish woman, a ceremony planned with Jewish rituals on her side of things though my first black friend wanted his culture represented too. I suggested jumping the broom with a white self-assurance gleaned from a few novels and various Oprah Winfrey shows. So after a glass was crushed beneath a towel, they half-heartedly leapt, and I was never sure if he did that for himself or for me.

Am I racist? My white kids think so, especially the night they found me cutting out a coupon for southern fried chicken from a flier. *You can't give a fried chicken coupon to a black man*, they objected, horrified, when I explained it was for my first black friend. *That's stereotyping*, they argued on script. *Yes, I can*, I said, *because this afternoon my first black friend confided that he was really missing southern fried chicken from home. And when I checked today's mail, I found this coupon. It's providence, isn't it?*

The next day I offered my first black friend the coupon, carefully reminding him of our previous conversation saying, *You could use my coupon if you're still hungry for that chicken*, with an uneasiness that my caution might be racist.

My first black friend lived in a nearby town not far from where I grew up where he became friends with another black man whom he referred to as "the other black guy in town." There were probably more than two black men living there, but none that I could name. Still it was nice that there were two so each could have one black friend too.

Because my first black friend had a wealth of white friends at work and around the community.

On MLK Day, he'd visit local public schools and add authenticity to presentations and performances on black history. Students loved him, teachers loved him. My first black friend became well-known. And in each town, he'd stop to introduce himself to police, security guards, even a few women of the DAR if he could catch them before they jaywalked across main street. Small in stature but large of voice, my first black friend could be heard calling to others blocks away.

Am I racist because I feel compelled to tell you about my first black friend? Maybe it's up to my first black friend to say. But that option has expired, cut off too soon by a malignancy within hope or purpose, with prescribed poison snaking through veins like tobacco smoke, through the drives home from oncology in my compact car fatigue treated by just being, just being, that and the dozens of painted handprints from friends of my first black friend on a homemade quilt that became his shroud so each of us could push away loss, and, in the only way I knew, to hold onto my first black friend.

Linda Vandlac Smith writes in a semi-rural valley north of Seattle. Much of her poetry focuses on interpersonal relationships, Pacific Northwest lifestyles, and their intersections. More than three dozen of her poems have appeared in print and online publications such as *Daily Rattle*, *Chiron Review*, *Permafrost*, *Pontoon Poetry*, and *Bellingham Review* and anthologies such as *Lavanderia* and *Flip Sides*.



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