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The First Few Friends

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THE FIRST FEW FRIENDS

MARILYN SINGER

College is still strange—and it keeps getting stranger. More and more meetings. Rallies. Calls for action. It's hard to study. Vietnam is on everyone's lips. Lists of the dead or missing appear daily. Of the American dead, that is. How many Vietnamese men, women and children have been killed is anybody's guess. Actually, there are reports that the lists of American casualties have been doctored too. Someone drew a picture of the Vietcong choking an Uncle Sam-dressed pig on the side of the Social Science building. People booed when the painters came and whitewashed it. Floyd says all black men should be exempt from military service because they should not be forced to fight and kill other Third World people who are being victimized by the white racist government of America. I asked why not exempt *all* people from the draft?

He smiled and said I was getting the right idea. Oh, Floyd. Now there's another problem. I don't understand our relationship at all. It's so... prickly. There are times when he's, I don't know, nice. Like the time two weeks ago.

There was another rally. I stopped to listen because Floyd was one of the speakers scheduled to talk about the need for a Black Studies program.

"The Black Panther Party put it concisely in their platform and program: 'We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else.' In the City University of New York, there are over 16,000 Black students. In the City University of New York, there is not one Black History course. Not one Black Literature course. Not one Black Music course. We Black students ask whose history we are studying? Whose literature? Whose music? How are we to gain a knowledge of our people, ourselves, when the Shitty University of New York will not teach us?" Floyd was saying.

"Right on!"

"Power to the People!"

"You tell it, brother!"

People shouted and applauded.

I stayed until the end of his speech and when he finished I cheered along with everyone else.

Then, I went to the amphitheater. It was kind of cold, but I felt like sitting outside anyway—soon it would be too cold to sit out at all. I

wanted to think about Floyd's speech. The things he'd said sounded right—most of what he says to me sounds right, once he explains it. I thought about all the English courses I'd taken and how we read few—if any—works by black writers. But there are other things Floyd said that are not so clear to me. Like will a Black Studies program educate white students, make them aware? And will black students study other history and literature and music beside their own?

Too bad the Crew doesn't want to talk about this stuff. Damn, I got so confused and weary thinking that after a bit I gave up and started to read a copy of John Donne's poems Gwyn had sent me—along with a lovely letter telling me how much he missed me and how Margaret was looking forward to meeting me. Margaret, by the way, turns out to be a fellow student who might also be coming to Colorado. Seems Gwyn spends a fair amount of time with her because they have the same major. I guess he's told her a lot about me, which is good in case she has any romantic inclinations. Anyway, there I was reading divine Donne when Floyd appeared.

"I thought I'd find you here." He smiled. "Saw you out there. What'd you think?"

"You're a good speaker."

"Thanks. That all you got to say?"

"Oh Floyd. I can't talk about it right now. My head's all muddled. I need time to think."

"I can dig it." He picked up the book I'd laid aside and flipped it open. "To teach thee I am naked first, why than/ What needst thou have more covering than a man."

"Not that one," I rapped out, involuntarily, and then turned red. He grinned. "What's the matter? Too risqué?"

"No... it's just... my boyfriend used to read that to me."

He stopped grinning. "Your boyfriend? Where's he when he's at home."

"England."

"Shee-it. No wonder you're so hung up on that place."

"Don't. Please," I warned.

He smiled again. "Okay, mama, I won't. I'm feeling too good to fight. That was a good speech I gave if I do say so myself." After a quiet minute, he reached out and pulled a withered leaf from my hair. "What do you want out of life, Nina girl?" he asked softly.

I knew the answer. Gwyn. I want Gwyn. And I want to be with my friends. But somehow I couldn't say that. I couldn't say anything, so I just shrugged. "I'm not sure. Do you know what you want?" I finally asked.

"Freedom. Power. Pride. Love. I want to live in a place where I—and my people—don't have to worry about getting shot in the back by some cop or being beaten to death in some cell or starving in some rat-infested dump. I want to teach my brothers and sisters about ourselves.

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I want us—and all oppressed people—to have freedom and food too. And I want to make music because we always need music.”

Then I felt ashamed of myself and my paltry wishes. And suddenly I felt like bursting into tears. I bit my lip.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Nothing. I... admire you.”

“Don’t admire me. That’s like making me some kind of thing. I may be a little exotic—provocative—to you because I’m Black and I talk politics. But I’m still just another human, that’s all. And I have been known in the past to piss, to get drunk occasionally and even to cheat on exams.”

I laughed, then shivered. It was cold out there and an icy wind had suddenly sprung up, making it even colder.

“Whew, time to split before they find us frozen in place like vanilla and chocolate popsicles.”

“Ugh!” I said.

“Yeah, that *was* pretty bad. *Vamos!*”

After that we sat in the Union and talked some more and I felt pretty comfortable with him, as though maybe our relationship was improving.

But that’s not how I felt the last time I saw him—about a week ago.

I had asked Billy if I could watch one of his dance classes. Billy and I have gotten to be pretty good friends. We met a lot at QC sometimes for lunch, sometimes to dance in the Union, sometimes to see some film being shown or some play or concert being performed during an afternoon. It’s all been light and casual and undemanding, with a friendly platonic physicality I’ve never had with a guy before. But I haven’t bothered to tell Dorrie about our relationship because as she and Billy still haven’t gotten it together, I thought she’d misunderstand. Anyway, now Billy has dropped out to take dance classes at the Joffrey. I really miss our meetings and excursions at Queens, so that’s why I asked if I could attend one of his classes. He said, “Sure. Come to a class.” So I did. And it was fascinating.

His teacher, a thin, elegant woman one would hesitate to call so vulgar a phrase as middle-aged, in black leotards and pink tights, surveyed the class with a practiced eye, correcting and complimenting and forcing the students to push past what they once thought were their limits.

“Rita, turn out your left foot. Gillian—bend the arms. Billy, straighten your leg.”

Billy’s leg already looked pretty straight to me, but he strained his hamstrings a bit more to achieve that perfect line.

I found the whole thing paradoxically awesome and human. Awesome because of those gorgeous, strong bodies and their sublime grace. Human because of their prodigious sweat and their tired faces.

"God, that was wonderful," I said to Billy when he plunked down beside me and massaged his left foot.

"I've got to work on that arabesque. It's still not right."

"Can I help?" I asked.

"My arabesque?"

"No, your toe. Here, I'll rub it," I said, gently kneading the knuckle.

"Oooh, that feels good. You're a born toe rubber."

"Thank God! I've found my station in life.... There. Better?"

"Yep." He shook his foot, then stretched his legs straight up in the air.

I watched in admiration. "Boy, you have terrific legs," I said.

"Why thank you, Miss Ritter. No one's ever complimented me on my legs before," he said, lowering them to the floor.

"No? Well the rest of you ain't bad either," I said, patting his flat, hard stomach.

"You're pretty good yourself." He conspicuously ran his eyes over my body.

"Nah, my hips are too big."

"I like big hips. They're womanly. Those skinny things in my class don't turn me on at all. Give me fl-esh!" he growled and, in one motion, pushed me down, flipped himself over on me and nuzzled my neck.

"Get off, you loony." I feebly smacked his bum.

He sighed and rolled off. "Oh Nina, you're so cruel."

"And you're so sweaty," I said, scrambling to my feet.

"Do I smell?" He sniffed his armpit. "Ugh. I'm going to change. You want to go someplace?"

"Yes, the Eighth Street Bookstore. Okay?"

"Sure. I'll be back in a few minutes. Wait for me downstairs."

On the way to Eighth Street we talked about how he had wanted to be a dancer since he was eight and how he didn't want to tell anyone because they'd call him a fruit.

"But you are a fruit," I said. "You're completely bananas."

"So are you—so I guess we're a quite a pear. Thank you. Thank you." He applauds himself and bows.

"Blah! We've been around Aviva too long."

"Aviva. She's a real trip. One of a kind. But you know, I wouldn't trust her with any personal confidence."

I was puzzled. "What do you mean? You think she'd tell everybody or something?"

"No, it's not that. But I get the feeling that she'd store it and use it against me somehow."

"Billy, what a strange thing to say. I thought you liked her."

"I do. But... I... don't trust her."

"Well, I do. She may be freaky and self-centered and demanding and sometimes she annoys the hell out of me, but I trust her."

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He shrugs. "Maybe I'm just paranoid."

"Maybe," I said. But his remark left me thinking. Aviva had done some thoughtless things. She was fully capable of the stinging retort or the supercilious put-down—like the time she read a poem of mine and pronounced it worthy of a Hallmark greeting card—or even of the unwitting insult, such as when she admired my parents' antique sewing table and proclaimed, "That's wonderful—the first really nice piece of furniture I've seen in your house!" But untrustworthy? No, I don't think so.

In the bookstore, I left Billy at the performing arts books and headed upstairs for the poetry section. I was thumbing through a book of Chinese poetry looking for a poem Gwyn had sent me in his last letter when I heard a familiar voice coming from somewhere else on the floor.

"Man, Arnie, that cat can blow! I'd love to jam with him."

"Yeah. I know what you mean!" came a second, unfamiliar voice.

Book in hand, I wandered to another aisle and saw Floyd talking to a short man, whose open jacket revealed a dashiki a lot like the one I own.

The guy saw me smiling and tapped Floyd. "Hey man, I think someone knows you."

Floyd turned his head, saw me and gave me a dazzling smile. "Hey girl, how you doing?"

"Fine. And you?"

"Good. Oh, this is my man Arnie—the finest flutist in New York. Next to me, of course. Arnie, this is Nina, fellow student and intellectual."

Arnie and I laughed and shook our heads. "This cat's too much," Arnie said and shook my hand.

"So, what you up to?" Floyd asked.

I showed him the book.

"This woman's always reading poetry," he said.

"What's wrong with that?" I bridled.

He didn't answer, just smiled.

"Yo, Floyd. I gotta split. See you later," Arnie said.

"Okay, man." They slapped five and Arnie left.

"We just jammed together," Floyd explained. "Nearby. So I decided to come here and buy some magazines and stuff."

"Find what you were looking for?"

"Not yet... Hey, listen. I thought I saw a notice outside for a reading by a couple of Black poets at NYU tonight. You interested? If you are, I guess I could be persuaded to attend," he said.

"It sounds good, but I've got work to do."

"Nina dearest, time to..." Billy stopped short. "Oh, I didn't see you."

"Billy, this is Floyd. He also goes to Queens."

"I think I've seen you around. You're involved in politics, right?" Billy said.

"Yeah," Floyd said curtly. Then to me, "This your work?" I thought he was kidding, so I laughed.

"Well, I don't want to muscle in on your time. 'Specially since you such a busy chick. All them *poems* to read." He practically spat out the word and then hurried down the stairs.

Billy's nostrils flared. "Whoa, what was all that about?"

"I honestly don't know," I said. "That man can be very difficult."

"Oh yeah? What's his problem?"

"I don't know. A lot of passion, I think."

"For you?" Billy asked quickly.

"Oh, no. His is a political sort. He's very bright, charismatic even, I think."

Billy scowled at the staircase. "He seemed goddamn rude to me."

"Yeah. Well... Look, I better get home and work on my paper. You ready to leave?"

"Yeah," Billy answered.

So I paid for my book and we took the subway back to Queens, reading Chinese poetry and talking about ballet. But I kept wondering about Floyd and why he acts the way he does and thinking that Billy was definitely not the right person to talk to about him. I wonder if I'll ever figure him out.

* * *

I tried reaching Billy tonight, but he wasn't home. But Floyd called.

"Nina, I guess I got to apologize to you again."

"I guess you do," I said coolly.

"I don't know what else to say," he said.

There was a silence and then I lost my cool and said angrily, "Trying to correct my politics is one thing, but trying to correct my love life is something else."

"You're right," he said quietly. "Your love life is none of my business."

After another silence, he said, "But you mean, you don't mind my trying to correct your politics?"

I couldn't help it—I laughed. "I guess I'm getting used to that."

"Don't get too used to it—then you'll stop asking questions and thinking for yourself. Hey listen, why I called besides to apologize, that blues we wrote—I've worked out an agreement between us and I'd like you to read it. Can I bring it over?"

"To my house?"

"Yeah, something wrong with that? Your parents gonna call by 'boy' and whup your behind or something?"

"No," I said curtly. "But I think it would be better if we met somewhere... uh... neutral. At a restaurant for lunch or something. I

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mean, we're talking about signing a contract, so I think we should be, uh, businesslike about it."

"Oh yeah. Businesslike," Floyd answered sardonically.

Here we go again, I thought. "Oh, forget it," I said, disgusted.

"No. You want to be businesslike, so let's be businesslike. Lunch tomorrow, one o'clock. I'll write it in my appointment book."

"Floyd..."

"You pick the place."

"Oh, I don't know. Gino's," I said, lighting in exasperation on a familiar hangout from my pre-England days.

"Gino's. Right. See you then." He hung up.

"Oooh!" I howled at the phone. "He makes me so mad!"

"Maybe he digs you," Pat had said.

Digs me, my ass! He's out to drive me crazy! Yelling and apologizing and mocking and apologizing. Telling me what to do, how to think. Accusing my parents... Then I stopped myself. No, Nina, he didn't accuse your parents. He accused you. No, he didn't even do that. He got your number. And got it right. It was true. I didn't want Floyd to come over because I didn't want to deal with my parents' questions about him. Why ask for trouble? as dad always says. But Floyd's just a friend, I could have told them—just like Cassie, another Black friend I once brought home. A friend is a friend. An easy, neat explanation. But the fact is I'm really confused about my feelings for Floyd—and each time I see him I get more confused. He's so bright, sharp, sarcastic. Sometimes he makes me so nervous. Because he's sarcastic? Because he's Black? Because he's a man? Or because he's attractive. Because he attracts me. Hell, attracts me? Admit it, Nina, big, Black, handsome Floyd turns you on. And I realize if I invited him here I'm afraid my parents would read it in huge letters on my chest: FLOYD TURNS NINA ON.

I wonder if Floyd can see it too and that's why he picks on me. After all, he doesn't pick on Aviva and she always sasses him like crazy. Ah shit, bad enough to have the hots for another man, but a Black militant man yet. Oh Nina, are you ever asking for trouble. Maybe I ought to stay away from him completely.

But the thing is even though it—my attraction—and he, Floyd, made me nervous, I really like him, too, as a friend and, well, as a teacher. I can learn a lot from him. I already have. I guess what I'm worried about are some other things I might learn.

Oh Gwyn, you better get here quick. You just better.

* * *

The last strains of "Let the Sunshine In" are dying away. Dorrie is wiping her eyes. Nancy is humming to herself. Aviva is toking away. Billy is drumming his fingers on the arm of his seat (I still haven't had the chance to talk with him alone. He had left town and just returned today.) And Floyd is cursing.

"Shit," he mutters, "Damn stupid bourgeois minstrel show!"

Nancy stops humming. "What's eating him?" she asks.

"I'll tell you what's eating him," Floyd snaps. "Pretty little white folk and pretty little Black folk all dancing together in natural rhythm. No cares, no woes. No hunger, no unemployment, no reality! Shit!"

"It's a musical, Floyd," Aviva says. "Not a treatise."

"What's that supposed to mean? That because it's some half-witted entertainment for the masses, it doesn't have to have any decent values?"

"It's trying to break out of the old-style musical molds," I say. "And it's trying not to be racist. I mean that song 'Colored Spade'..."

"Yeah, right. 'Colored Spade.' Great example, Nina. Lists a bunch of stereotypes and everyone laughs. And *agrees*. Where's the positive image?" He looks pointedly with me. "That dude up there balling white chicks? Great image!"

"You think he shouldn't be balling white chicks?" Aviva asks.

"No baby, I don't."

"Awww, and I thought you cared," she says.

For a moment no one speaks. Then the tension breaks. Floyd laughs. We all join in.

An usher appears, urging us to vacate his theater.

"Easy, man, we're the oppressed masses," Billy says.

The usher stiffens. "You'll have to leave anyway. We have another show to perform in less than four hours."

"Oh, you acting in it?" Avi asks.

"Please leave now or I'll have to summon the manager."

"Summon away."

The usher stalks off.

"Uh-oh," says Nancy. "He's lost his cool."

"Tsk-tsk," Avi answers.

But I'm still upset that Floyd is upset. "I still don't understand your objections, Floyd," I say. "I mean, everyone in this show was equal—nobody was better than anyone else, nobody was putting down Blacks."

"Right, everything was just hunky-dory and we all love each other so much and nobody's uptight, right?"

"You don't think it can be that way?"

"I don't think it can be that way. Unless Blacks have as much power in this country as whites—power over our own schools, communities and government. If we can get that power peacefully, fine. If not, we will use whatever means are necessary."

"Floyd, you don't mean you advocate violent overthrow of the government? Things take time; they have to evolve..."

"Damn, Nina, you talk like *Time* magazine, you know that? All white and mealy-mouthed."

The shock waves reverberate. I stand up, shaking. "I'm going," I quaver.

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Then the usher arrives with the manager in tow. The manager is fat and balding and very managerial.

"Now, what seems to be the trouble here?" he asks condescendingly.

"Nothing, sir," Billy says.

"Nothing at all. We're waiting for the dawning of the Age of Aquarius," Aviva says with great innocence.

"Are you waiting for someone in the cast? The stage door is out that door to your..."

"Excuse me," I say, pushing past him and the usher and out the door to which the former is gesturing.

When I get outside, I feel the tears starting to flood. "Aw, crap," I mutter and head for an alley where I can be alone. It's not just the play or even the government he's attacking this time. It's me personally. And I don't know why. I've been so confused about him since the other day. "Oh, crap," I say again.

This must be the stage-door alley because the guy who played Berger is just coming out with one of the actresses. I don't want to talk to him, tell him how good he was. Don't want to talk to anybody. Better split.

"Nina."

I jump.

Floyd grabs my arm before I can get past him.

"Let me alone!" I growl.

"Nina, I'm sorry."

"Listen, you put me down almost every time we see each other. And then you apologize and then you do it again. I've had enough. I don't understand why. Last time..." You tried to kiss me, I almost say. But I don't want to bring up something that was probably a momentary aberration.

"Nina, let me say something. Please."

"Why? So you can insult me again?"

"Just listen. I said some stupid things before. I shouldn't let my personal feelings get in the way of my politics. I don't want to hurt you, to attack you. But I'm angry. I'm angry all the time. And I've got good reasons to be angry. And you, well, you're smarter than all the rest of the Crew—smarter and tougher. And when you start talking like some candy-ass liberal, I can't stomach it. I want to shake you."

I am stunned. What is this man talking about? Smarter? Tougher? Than Aviva? No way.

"You could help a lot; you could do something. But then you start spouting *Time* or getting stoned. Shit, Nina, you don't value me and you don't value yourself. It makes me sick."

"Then why bother with me at all?" I hurl. There, now, lay it on the table.

He touches my cheek and searches my eyes. "If you don't know that, you don't know nothing."

Oh God. What is he telling me? Confused, I push him away. "You're right. I don't know nothing. Nothing at all."

We glare at each other. Two cats. Spines arched. Backing away from each other, from the stream of actors brushing their way past.

Finally, Floyd eases down his shoulders. "Nina, come with me now. You go with Aviva and company, you're just gonna get wiped. I'll introduce you to some other people—people who are doing something."

"Hey, Nina!" Aviva's voice cuts through the cold air. "Hey, where are you? Is Floyd molesting you?"

Floyd's whole face contracts. "Nina, come with me. Come on."

I feel fixed to the pavement. Unable to move toward Floyd. Unable to move away.

"Where are you?"

An actress bundles past, singing a snatch of "Easy to Be Hard."

Floyd balls his fist and hits the wall. "Ah shit, Nina. You just gonna stand there, ain't you? Just stand and wait for that Prince Charming you write to come over from England and take you away from All This. To where it's clean, green and obscene. Then you won't have to see my Black face or anybody else's ever again."

Furious, I strike at his face. He just stands there and lets me hit him. "You... you... creep!" I yell and try to punch him again.

But he grabs my wrist. "No. Once is all you get."

Then, in a blur of skin and denim, Billy is there. Yelling, "What are you doing to her, man?" And twisting Floyd's arm behind his back.

"No!" I cry.

Like a scene from a comic book, eyes wide, hands up, frozen, Aviva, Dorrie and Nancy stand at the mouth of the alley.

Floyd and Billy are grappling on the ground, arms interlocked. Somebody steps out of the stage door, gasps, runs back inside.

"Stop it!" I yell. "Stop it."

Aviva snaps awake. She and Dorrie run over and reach for Billy and try to pull him off. but he's too strong. Nancy and I tug at Floyd.

Then we hear a siren.

Instantly, we all stop.

"Get out. Quick," Floyd pants.

I help him up.

We all run out of the alley as the cop car pulls up.

A fat white cop is throwing open the door. I see his hand on his gun.

"In here," I breathe frantically, and Nancy and I pull Floyd into the nearest doorway.

Two seconds later and Aviva and Dorrie and Billy are inside with us. Avi is cramming something into her mouth. "Grass," Dorrie whispers.

"Shit," I say.

"Shhhh," Floyd hisses.

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"You want something?"

"Ahhhh!" I yell. It sounds as though my voice multiplied five times over. Then I realize that everybody else has gasped too.

A buxom woman with dyed black hair is giving us a mean stare.

Then, for the first time, we notice the pictures on the walls. Erotic line drawings with MASSAGE PARLOR written under them in red letters. We all seem dumbstruck. Except Floyd who says, "Cops after us."

The woman's face softens. "Back here. Come on." She leads us through some black velvet curtains into a little cubbyhole of a room. More curtains and a table/bed of sorts. A young black woman in a flimsy pink negligee thing peeks in.

"Out, Hattie. And tell Josie to go out front."

"Cops again?"

"Yeah." She turns to us. "Just stay here. I'll tell you when you can go."

Somehow, no one wants to sit on the table/bed. So we stand. Billy and Floyd, who has a cut on his cheek, avoid each other's eyes. A thick sullenness blankets the room.

After a while, Hattie looks in. She motions to Floyd. "Hey, mister!"

He looks up.

"You want me to do you while you're waiting?"

He smiles gently. "That's a kind offer, sister. But not today."

She smiles back. "Okay," she says and saunters back out with a little wiggle of her hips.

And suddenly, I feel very tired and sad. Gwyn's face bobbles up before me. But somehow, even it's not very comforting.

I turn to Floyd. I want to say something. But it's hard with the Crew there.

Then the buxom woman comes back.

"Okay. You can go."

The Crew scrambles out of the room. Floyd reaches in his pocket and pulls out a five. "Sorry I don't have more," he says, handing it to the woman.

"Wait. I have some," I say, pull out another five and put it into her hand.

"Thanks," she says and ambles away.

"Floyd..." I begin.

"Don't. It won't work," he says.

"Can't I say anything?"

"No. Not now."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I." He shakes his head and goes out into the street.

When I get there, he's gone.



Photo courtesy of Ohio State University Archives.



Photo courtesy of Miami University Archives.