

Supermarket Encounter

Category: Race

written by Stephanie Friedman | August 27, 2016

I was in a large supermarket in the late afternoon. At the busy cheese counter, I took a number and stood waiting in the large crowd. When my number was called, I pushed through the customers to the counter and gave my order. After I'd finished, I took a half-step backward and collided with someone.

As I turned around to apologize, I found myself facing a young woman who towered over me. I am white; she was African-American and wore the uniform of a meter maid. I said that I was sorry, that I hadn't seen her.

"I was standing right behind you," she said. Her tone was truculent; my apology had clearly not been accepted.

It was a tense moment. I tried glaring at her, but since she was a head taller I had to bend my head backwards to meet her glance.

"You got a problem?" she said.

"No, I don't have a problem," I replied, as evenly as my quaking voice would allow. But I had been unjustly accused of something I hadn't meant; I was trembling with frustration.

A few minutes later, at the checkout counter, the young woman stood in the next line. I had to set the record straight. I walked over and said, "What happened over there?" She said, "You walked right past me like I wasn't there. You disrespected me."

"I didn't see you. I'm sorry. I meant no offense."

She smirked. "It's not like I'm not noticeable," she said.

"No," I smiled. "I was in a hurry."

She nodded.

And that was that. Except that later, I suddenly realized what that woman's everyday dealings with white people must be like. And I had the strange desire, in the unlikely event of encountering her again, to call her my friend.

Some weeks later, my husband and I were walking in the downtown part of our city, and I heard a voice call out, "Hi!" And there she was, in her meter-maid cart, smiling the broadest smile I'd ever seen. The words were out of my mouth before I knew it: "Oh, it's my friend!"

She looked younger, happier, not the guarded, angry person I'd encountered in the market. Would it always be so easy to find a common human bond? Perhaps not. But I resolved to continue trying.

Stephanie Friedman
Berkeley, California