

# The Magical Negro Speaks

*Lisa Allen-Agostini*

**“*D****ou came into my life like a force of nature: you were the tsunami to my Indonesia, Hurricane Katrina to my levees.”* Of course, by the time the earthquake was over and Port Royal was under the Caribbean Sea a legend was born. But you can’t live in a legend. You might look back on it with awe at the destruction and maybe regret for what once had been; you might moralise about why so much had to be lost. But you can’t hold it and marry it and make babies with it. That’s not what happens after a force of nature hits you. Basically, you sweep up the water when the floods subside, bury your dead and move the hell on.

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His head tilted to the side, he looked with puzzlement at Abraham Entertaining the Angels. His fair hair stood on end in artful spikes; he looked like he’d been dipped head first into a vat of gel and left to dry hanging by his ankles. Young. The pen crosshatching an angel’s wing hesitated, stuttering in midair while he mapped Rembrandt’s work with his eyes. A white T-shirt, not branded with Nike or Oakley or Von Dutch or whatever it was kids were in that season; his shirt was an empty canvas. He wore shorts over vintage Chuck Taylors, frayed black ones with white soles that looked authentically scuffed, not bought that way. From his army green satchel a spiral bound drawing pad stuck out where he’d closed the bag’s flap carelessly as it hung from his shoulder. He was the kind of thin you’d call rangy, if you knew the word. He was too young for me.

I didn’t bump into him on purpose. It really was an accident that I had swung my arms just a little too wide as I stretched, trying to work out the kink I had in my neck from looking up at all those paintings for hours on end. He apologized to me, that slow Southern drawl melting me from the very start. Oh, it’s not your fault, I told him, *I hit you; I’m sorry*. But I had an accent too. There was no distance at all from the angels to the ice cream truck on the Smithsonian’s pavement, or so it seemed because there we were in a blink with stunned expressions and cones in our hands. It was hot, the kind of hot only DC does, humid and still, and the air was like steam rising slowly off a bowl of rice. Rivulets of vanilla ran down his wrist. I wanted to lick them off. I didn’t even know his name yet.

We spent the rest of the day together, wandering through galleries of drawings long after I had grown sick of the art. When I was tired I looked at him instead. He fascinated me, his skin nearly glowing under the bright freckles on his arms and cheeks, the downy white hair at the back of his neck, his small teeth, the way he gripped the heavy pen so hard it left notches on his fingers. Every so often he'd shoot me a glance beneath the sweep of his ridiculously long, black lashes. I'd blush each time, not that you'd have noticed. But maybe he did notice. He didn't stop.

Predictably, we ended up in bed together that night. By then we knew each others' names; I'd found out that he wasn't too young for me, after all; and he was working on learning to say yeah mon, even though I wasn't from Jamaica, which I told him over and over in between sighs as he kissed the back of my long, brown neck, lifting my thick curls as if parting a veil before a treasure. To our mutual surprise we saw each other the next day, and the next, for nearly three months.

There was no question that we loved each other. We would eat each other up, subsuming language and culture and all the rest that divided us in touches that were naked even when we were fully clothed. I never met his friends, nor he mine. We lived in each other for five or six hours a night in my dingy apartment on Georgia Avenue, going out for food and art on the weekends. I tried to learn how to draw and he tried to learn the names of birds but it was never anything we took seriously because to each other we were ideal, needing nothing to make our union more perfect. He went to work—he was a newspaper cartoonist—and I to my thesis and then we sloughed off our days at the door. Drowned in each other, we ignored everything but the way we felt, the unreal, crystalline beauty of each moment we had together.

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I teach. I'm my island's youngest expert on migratory birds and I've taught about sixty students a year at the university since I came back home with my doctorate. Most of them end up teaching biology to teenagers; only a couple in all those years have shown keen interest in the conservation and study of the birds that fly here every autumn and disappear into the next spring's skies. I try to teach my students that the world is borderless, that the political boundaries humans have invented are not real to the birds of the air. They nod; they take notes. But you can see in their small, settled lives that they learn nothing from the paths of these birds.

And why should they? I travel a little for work—conferences twice year, and whatever meetings the university makes me attend on its behalf—but I myself am settled here and have no wish to leave. My parents are here, retired civil servants who swim in the ocean early on mornings since my father had his heart attack, attend evening mass at our parish church praying for God to heal

my mother's glaucoma, and pass their days in reading, gardening and keeping house. I live nearby in a flat inconveniently far from my job but close enough to my parents that I could be on their porch in five minutes if there were an emergency. I have a few friends, the same ones I've had since I was a student here myself. We have movie night on Fridays and drink wine on Saturday nights. We're all single and nobody minds when somebody gets drunk and wakes up on the couch Sunday morning. It's the life we've chosen. It's the life I chose.

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*"Do you remember that Sunday when we saw a voodoo doll in the folk art stall? It was such a ridiculously black thing, with those mismatched glass beads for eyes and that sackcloth dress. When I bought it, I wanted to show it to you, to tell you what the vendor had told me: that if I tied a strand of your hair to it and buried it in my back yard, it would bring you back to me. It was a joke and I didn't understand why you didn't find it funny. It was just a joke. But you got so mad you didn't say a word to me again until I kissed the back of your neck at your door that night. I threw the doll in the trash and we didn't talk about it again. But I didn't know why you felt the way you did. I didn't even understand exactly what you felt. You never told me and I guess I couldn't ask until now."*

This letter has taken me by surprise. We email once in a blue moon, and before this message never got beyond the superficial patter of two ex-lovers who have nothing really to say. He told me when he went back for his MBA, and when he started his own magazine; I told him when I bought my flat, and when I got tenure. But now, so long after our affair, he has written a letter—in pen and ink on paper—to ask me to marry him. He has never got over me, he said; no one made him feel the way he felt with me. He said I was the reason he started the magazine, because being with me had made him want to make something of himself.

I wonder how I should reply.

I'm in the verandah of my parents' house, the house in which I grew up. A wild Orange-winged Amazon Parrot, *Amazona amazonica tobagensis*, squawks in the garden and I pause to consider its ancestors' path from the South American jungle to this island where it eats fruit from my parents' trees and becomes a nuisance to my father, who dislikes its long, white droppings and the half-eaten fruit it leaves behind even more than my mother dislikes its constant raw screeching. Though parrots are naturally gregarious, this one is always alone. I've never seen it fly with others whose pairs of bright green wings spread wide soaring into the blue sky. Do I imagine desolation in its cries?

Behind the tree in which it is perched eating my parents' ripe mangoes, the hills lounge in hazy splendor. I've known these hills all my life. They are like comforting old friends. This is what I should tell him, I think: *I always knew I would come back to these hills. They are home and I couldn't leave them. I loved you but I loved the hills more. As deep and sudden as it was, our love alone could never be as big as*

*these bills.* In the tree the parrot, so far from South America, nibbles a mango for its solitary dinner.

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The leaves on the Mall were turning gold when he drove me to the airport. We didn't talk much on the way. He parked his car and helped me with my bags at curbside check-in, and we walked around holding hands until they called my flight.

Do you think, he started to say, but stopped when we spotted the Smithsonian store. He dragged me inside, laughing because even though we'd spent nearly every weekend at a Smithsonian building we'd never bought any souvenirs. He bought me a soapstone heart. Take it, he said. You'll have it forever. When his back was turned I picked up a Kewpie doll and wrapped a strand of my hair around it. I wanted to thrust it into his hand. For the other one, I wanted to say. But I put it back on the shelf and steeled myself to walk to the gate.

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I have decided how to reply. This is what I will write: *Love has its own geometry. No one can predict or program where the heart will go when it loves, what paths it will describe in its trajectory. Love makes the heart willful and capricious and blind, and the heart will go where it will go. My heart had to come home.*

And isn't it only partly a lie, o my willful heart?