

"Fragile No More"

By Vanessa Fulton

It was a brisk Fall day when I heard someone knocking at my door. Standing outside was a tall, African American man. He looked to be about 285 pounds and well over 6 feet tall. It was Chris, the pest control guy. I extended my hand and noticed that despite his large frame and muscular build, he shook my hand in a delicate way as if he were afraid he hurt me. Then he apologized for knocking and not noticing the doorbell. I assumed it was okay and went to take his coat, but he wouldn't allow me to take it and instead just wrapped it around his waist. He seemed fidgety like he was holding his breath for some reason, and while he was sweating refused to accept my offer for water to get him some.

He was there for a routine pest control and critter extermination. As we made our way to the basement, I noticed him hesitating at the top of the stairs. He had a concerned look on his face and then began fumbling with the things in his pocket. He walked so slowly down the steps, pausing at each step looking back up the stairs. He eventually made it to the basement and sprayed twice making sure every crack and crevice was looked at. Once the treatment was complete, I turned around to head back

upstairs. When I looked back to say something, I noticed out of the corner of my eye that something had caught his attention.

Chris was stopped at a photo hanging above a leather recliner next to a brass lamp on a wooden table. The photo was of Tupac Shakur. It was as if Tupac had invited him in this moment. My husband Brent and I bonded over his music when we first met 15 years ago. I remember visiting my husband's dorm room in college and there were posters of Tupac everywhere and his CDs stacked alongside the movies he was in. We would spend hours listening to our favorite songs and deliberating over whether they would start teaching the Sociology of Tupac Shakur courses in the upcoming term. Tupac has meant so much to our forming relationship that no matter where we lived, we always displayed this photo of him.

After Chris saw the picture of Tupac in our basement, I noticed a distinct shift in his attitude, stance and demeanor. He was so different then he had been moments before. I could see he was thinking, the energy in the space all of a sudden felt freer, he exhaled, and finally took his coat off, stopped shaking his hands, and he began to hum a song. There was a now friendly sparkle

in his eye, and he seemed to feel less like a stranger sort of tip toeing around the house. This made me wonder if Chris didn't come down the stairs the same time I did because he was waiting for permission to come down. He seemed to have felt uncomfortable in my home because we are a white family, and the more we were alone together I had a feeling it was because I was a white woman and he was a black male. But then seeing him change after he saw the picture of Tupac hanging on the wall, I felt compelled to understand why he felt a little more relaxed.

For days after the interaction, I wondered what had happened. If it was the photo did shift the mood that afternoon, I still didn't understand how just one picture could change a person's entire comfort level and vibe. I wanted to know more but I had seen it with my own eyes and knew that was exactly what happened. So, I did what every person does and began to google random phrases associated with black people's comfort around white people. It took me through a journey of civil rights, Martin Luther King Jr., Mississippi riots and then I came across a name that will forever stay with me, Emmett Till. Emmett was a 14-year-old boy wrongly accused of offending a white woman and was brutally murdered because of it. Not only that, the accuser later reported she lied

about most of that incident. As I read more about him, I was in disbelief that this occurred and then I got angry. I couldn't think straight and was so confused and saddened that this was just one of the many horrific occurrences in America's history.

I continued reading as much as I could and then I also landed on a phrase I was not familiar with; white fragility. What could that mean? I soon learned it essentially describes the faction that prevents white Americans from confronting racism because it is too painful for them to discuss. This made me even more angry and confused. As if race wasn't hard enough to talk about, now there is terminology surrounding why some white people cannot handle even hearing about it. And why have I not heard of this before? All those race and gender courses I took in graduate school certainly did not scratch the surface of some of the concepts I was reading in the latest literature.

It struck me to the core. As I went into a deeper dive the nature of white fragility, I started getting a sickening feeling that for me not to know what that meant implied that I had instant privilege. From the second I was born, I held cards that minorities did not. While I

was a female and may face a few challenges going forward, it could never compare to the identities that my counterparts would face. At first, I became intentional on what it meant to be a white woman learning about white fragility. However, I quickly realized a shift inside of me that began to move away from what it meant to be a white woman learning about this white fragility and felt it was far more important to gain an understanding of how I could be an ally and more culturally sensitive.

For months I daydreamed that at the time this pivotal moment happened, I had the social awareness back then to have asked Chris that I noticed him shift into a more comfortable space after seeing Tupac. But even if I did, I cannot say for certain if I would have for fear of being uncomfortable or saying the wrong thing. Some say that when you get uncomfortable enough, that's when you know you are on the right path. And I am definitely uncomfortable being a white woman talking about race for fear that there is no credibility in this. But one thing I know for certain now through my reflection on this experience is that I can notice things I would not have before. Perhaps in part to the man in the photo still displayed on our wall, Tupac Shakur.