# KWANZAA and Me

## A TEACHER'S STORY

VIVIAN GUSSIN PALEY

author of *You Can't Say You Can't Play*

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# *Kwanzaa and Me*

By the same author

*White Teacher*

*Wally's Stories*

*Boys and Girls:*
*Superheroes in the Doll Corner*

*Mollie Is Three:*
*Growing Up in School*

*Bad Guys Don't Have Birthdays:*
*Fantasy Play at Four*

*The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*

*You Can't Say You Can't Play*

*To Beverly Biggs*

*with gratitude*

The young black woman calls softly from the doorway. "Hey, white teacher, it's me, Ayana." Before I can turn around she is at the sink hugging me, careful not to upset the little jars I am filling with paint.

Her name is Sonya Carter, not Ayana. I called her Ayana in *White Teacher,* a book I wrote in the seventies when she was in my kindergarten, giving her the African name because she symbolized for me the excitement of this integrated school to which I had just come. Years later Sonya read that book and telephoned me late at night from her college dorm. "I'm Ayana, right?" she whispered.

Now I need her to be Ayana again, to inspire me as she did long ago. Sonya in real life, Ayana in the book, she brought a generous and loving voice to that mostly white kindergarten. "Tell me what's wrong, baby," she would murmur to a tearful classmate, and we all wanted to be the one she comforted. Say it to me, Sonya, say it to me too, was our silent plea.

I want her to tell me that this is still a good place for Ayana,

this integrated classroom, because a lot of people are sure it isn't. And that it probably never was.

"Sonya, can you stay a while? The children won't be here for another half hour. I want to tell you about some things that have been happening." We sit at a low table and I try to collect my thoughts. "The thing is, I find myself increasingly inhibited on the subject of black children."

"Inhibited? You?" Sonya smiles indulgently.

"Well, that's the way it feels." I hesitate, wondering if I am speaking to Sonya or to Ayana. The memory of Ayana supports my illusions, but I am unsure about Sonya. There she sits, with dangling earrings and close-cropped hair, looking so . . . what's the word? Preoccupied? The list of grievances I'm about to unfold is not my own, but after trying to avoid them, I cannot dismiss them from my mind.

"Remember Mrs. Junius, in the high school?" I ask. "She wrote an article in which she out and out tells black parents not to send their children to this school when they are young. Or to any other white school. Especially the boys."

I wait for Sonya's reaction but she is staring at some crayon marks on the table, so I continue. "She sends her own children to a neighborhood school, an all-black school."

Sonya looks up, frowning. "It never occurred to you that we might question the integrated school?" I am mindful of her use of *we.*

"No, it didn't. This is the one thing I've taken for granted. The integrated school." Sonya shifts in her chair, glancing at her watch, and I speak a little faster.

"Then two other things happened, one shortly after the article, maybe even because of it. A middle school teacher, also black,

told some people that she thinks the black boys who enter our school *after* sixth grade do better than those who begin in nursery school. In other words, they survive more intact if they spend their early years with black children and teachers."

Sonya's stoical expression confuses me. The school she has gone to is being rejected *because* it is integrated and she seems unmoved. "Okay, one more and I'm done. Last year I was on a panel with a sociology professor, the only African American in the group. He was even more emphatic, angry really, in his arguments against the integrated classroom."

My explanation must seem endless and I am grateful to be nearing the end. "He announced that he wouldn't send his little girl to a white school, no matter how good it was supposed to be. He said, 'I won't have her coming home from school telling me she's dumb and ugly. My friends' kids have had this done to them.'"

"So have I, Mrs. Paley," Sonya says quietly. "Plenty of times."

"But your mother never told me."

"Well, maybe not in kindergarten. Probably back then I imagined myself a blond blue-eyed Cinderella. But later, when I stopped pretending . . . Listen, this sociology professor and the others, they know what they're talking about."

I am annoyed with myself for suddenly remembering a doll-corner scene in which she imagined herself a *black* Cinderella. Or was it someone else who had used "black" with such confidence? "But, Sonya, he wants his daughter in a segregated school! The kind he himself *had* to go to before desegregation."

"Ah, so this is why you don't write about the black children any more," Sonya breaks in.

"Should I?" I ask. "Just what is their school experience? Here are some very thoughtful people, yourself included, who are so

certain it's a bad one I'm almost afraid to tackle the subject." I reach across the table and take Sonya's hand. "Did you really feel dumb and ugly?"

Sonya is so solemn I think she might cry. "I was walking on eggs the whole time. Hell, I still am. All these places I've been sent to are racist. They can't help it. My mom hates when I talk this way to a white person. Oh, did she tell you I'm transferring to Spelman? I've wanted to go to a black college for a long time but I worried about my folks. Turns out they don't mind a bit."

We listen to the sound of children calling to one another in the hallway. Then Sonya gets up, swinging her backpack into place. "And so you sidestep the whole business by writing a book about everyone being nice to everyone without exactly mentioning to whom. And the black folks go into those Magpie stories of yours where you can control matters a bit."

Sonya is referring to my most recent book, *You Can't Say You Can't Play,* the story of a classroom experiment in which children are no longer allowed to reject one another, hence the title. To lighten the load I have added a magical bird named Magpie who accomplishes similar ends with a variety of lost and lonely characters, some of whom are black.

"They *are* nice stories, by the way. How did you ever think of including them in such a serious book for grown-ups?" Before I can answer, Sonya grabs a brown crayon and steps to the easel, drawing three brown-faced people with crowns on their Afros. "Let's see, there's Princess Annabella, Prince Kareem, and Maruska the doll—they look black but they sure don't talk black!" She gives her words an exaggerated drawl and laughs.

"Would you like to know why I made the princess black?" I ask. "There were three black girls who ignored a black doll I'd

just bought. They played with a white doll that wasn't nearly as pretty. So I named the black doll Princess Annabella and made up a story about an African princess who lives with her father in a lonely forest . . ."

Sonya raises her finger. "Until Magpie brings them to the Kingdom of Tall Pines. Yeah, how come you never sent a magical bird to rescue me?"

"Funny thing," I answer sadly, "when I wrote *your* book I didn't think you needed to be rescued. *I* was the one floundering in self-doubts."

Sonya sits down again. "Did it work?" she asks. "Did they play with the black doll?"

"Yes they really did. And they also began to draw brown faces." I point to her sketches. "They'd never done that before at school. The effect was remarkable."

Sonya smiles at me. "Not strange at all. See, you create the characters in your Magpie stories and the child whose real story is touched upon feels legitimated." She jumps up and walks around the table. "That black doll now *belongs* in this classroom. She's been given a name and an important story. That's it! We black kids need a story of our own inside the classroom story. I think you're onto something. By the way, has Magpie met any more black folks?"

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact. I brought in a new character just yesterday, in a chapter about a runaway slave named Kwanzaa."

Sonya whoops with laughter. "Fantastic! Kwanzaa? My secret holiday is your runaway slave?"

"But, Sonya, why has it been such a secret? I just discovered Kwanzaa last week."

Sonya stands over me, her brows arched, her head held high.

I remember that look. She is my Princess Annabella, for sure. "Because never once," she measures out each word, "did any of you teachers mention Kwanzaa. It was in the newspapers but you were not the least bit curious. We knew we'd sound ridiculous if we talked about it."

"Why ridiculous?"

"It was too *black,* too African sounding, too pushy. It didn't belong here, which meant *we* didn't belong here. But no one said stuff like that then."

We stare at each other. Then Sonya gives an apologetic smile. "Please don't feel bad when I tell you this. I really do agree with that professor. I'd have done better in a black school. I'd have been more confident. I was an outsider here."

It is Lorraine Barnes, one of our third-grade teachers, who tells me about Kwanzaa. Passing her room a few days before Sonya's visit, I notice what seems to be an odd-looking Chanukah menorah on her desk.

"There *is* a menorah over there on the window sill, but this is a kinara," she explains. "See? Seven branches. We use it to celebrate Kwanzaa." With no sign of recognition from me she adds, "That's an African American holiday. It comes right after Christmas."

"But I've never heard of it!" I exclaim.

"It's not very old," she replies kindly. "It began in the sixties and our family took it up immediately, my uncles especially. They've always been big on anything that brings the black community together."

As Lorraine speaks I try to remember if she had ever men-

tioned "the black community" when we taught together in the same classroom fifteen years earlier. Why had she not told me then about Kwanzaa, I wonder.

"The purpose of Kwanzaa," she continues, "is to honor and practice the virtues that strengthen family and community, things like unity, industry, creativity, and so forth. I can give you something to read if you want to know more. By the way, not every black family celebrates Kwanzaa."

After reading the pamphlet I call Kesha's mother, figuring, perhaps unrealistically, that a family giving their child an African name probably celebrates Kwanzaa. Mrs. Johnston sounds surprised and pleased when I ask her to teach us about Kwanzaa. "My pleasure," she says.

"I'll come tomorrow if I may. There's nothing you need to do. I'll bring everything."

Kesha and her mother arrive wearing matching blouses of an African design and carrying covered baskets. The smaller basket holds a shiny red wooden kinara and a straw mat on which to place it, and the larger one bears fruit and corn, colorful scarves and shawls and wood carvings, along with red, black, and green candles and other objects. In it are also teacakes still warm from the oven. "My mother-in-law's recipe," Mrs. Johnston says. "She's our Kwanzaa expert. She's even learning to speak Swahili."

Kesha lifts one item at a time while her mother explains its meaning, always in personal terms. "This is Kesha's daddy's favorite," she says, pointing to a silver goblet. "We sip from it to show that we are one family. Then we eat the fruit of the harvest and we thank those who planted and harvested the food. Can you say 'chakula'? That's the Swahili word for food." The children

practice the new word while Mrs. Johnston arranges the remaining objects on a second straw mat and puts the candles in the kinara. "Kesha's grandparents brought these hand-carved animals home from a trip to Africa, and the scarves and shawls too. Kesha, honey, shall we put on the shawls and sing our Kwanzaa song?"

At this point, with everyone staring at her and several children giggling, Kesha loses her nerve. Undaunted and smiling, Mrs. Johnston puts both arms around her daughter and sings out: "Kwanzaa is the time to celebrate, The fruits of our labor, Ain't it great! Celebrate Kwanzaa, Kwanzaa!" By the second repetition, many of us are singing along while the teacakes are passed around.

Then Mrs. Johnston reads to us from a book of African folktales, about Anansi the spider who is saved from many disasters by his brave children. To reward them he throws a dazzling sphere of light he has found in the forest high into the sky to become the moon for all to enjoy, and everyone dances. "Ngoma," she tells us. "Ngoma means dancing to the beat of the drums. Now you know two Swahili words, no, three: chakula, ngoma, and guess what? Kwanzaa."

The next morning, quite unexpectedly, Kwanzaa enters a Magpie story. I am at my desk before the sun is up, looking at pictures of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Abraham Lincoln, deciding which ones to frame and bring to school. Lincoln's deep-set eyes look out from under a stovepipe hat and I know he is worried about slavery. Dr. King is pictured speaking to a large crowd and he too seems to be thinking of slavery and its aftermath. What does it mean to Kesha and the other black

children to be told by me, a white teacher, that some black people had been slaves?

Suddenly I see one slave clearly and his name is Kwanzaa. He will come to live in our classroom, as have Princess Annabella and Prince Kareem, participants in the ongoing drama. I need them all to help me talk about some crucial issues: black and white, slavery and freedom, friendship, community. Children, even as young as kindergartners, are devoted to philosophical inquiry, but to go beyond the fleeting thought, they must meet these important concepts inside a story.

Am I sidestepping some problems, as Sonya suggests? Perhaps she is right. It is so easy to justify behaviors that feel good. In any case, a few of these Kwanzaa stories are included here for the same reason I tell them to the children: my journey into black and white, or to any other self-defining region, must always involve storytelling, the children's, mine, and that of all the interested parties I meet along the way.

*Those pirates are in big trouble, thought Magpie, as he watched them climb out of the ship's hold. He understood their desire to escape from the king's dungeon but why steal Queen Millicent's jade chess set after she was nice enough to let them play with it? This made no sense to the large black and white bird.*

*He circled high above the ship until he could see the four men on deck, arguing as usual even while they fished off the bow. Only then did Magpie swoop down and go below deck to look for the jeweled chess box.*

*"May I help you find something?" came a low whisper. "My name is Kwanzaa."*

*Peering into the shadows, Magpie saw a man huddled in the corner of a tiny prison cell. "I've been so lonely sitting here," he said. "Perhaps we could talk for a while."*

*"I'll do more than talk," Magpie assured him, introducing himself to the dark-skinned man. "I'll try to open this rusty lock and get you out. By the way, the pirates have stolen a chess set from the queen. Have you seen it?"*

*Kwanzaa pointed to a trunk under the bunks. "It's in there. They expect her to pay 100 gold pieces for its return. Do you think she will?"*

*"Ha!" Magpie cawed. "The Royal Guards are standing by ready to sink this ship and recapture these nervy fellows." He pecked steadily at the lock, careful not to make too much noise, while Kwanzaa spoke to him of sad events. "My life is full of bad luck. No sooner do I escape from a slave owner than I am kidnapped off the ship taking me home to Africa. These pirates offered me gold to join them but I refused. I was brought up to be neither a slave nor a pirate."*

*The lock spring was beginning to move. In another moment or two the prisoner would be free. "How did you become a slave?" asked Magpie.*

*"I was digging for clams one day on the beach of my village," Kwanzaa answered, "when some men stole me away. They brought me to America in chains and sold me into slavery. I never saw my family again."*

*With a sharp twist of his beak, Magpie snapped open the lock. "That is a sad story, my friend, but your luck is about to change. Tell me, can you swim?"*

*Kwanzaa grinned and said, "I can swim like a fish and run like a deer but I cannot fly like a magpie."*

*"You are a brave man," Magpie said, "to be able to smile after what has happened to you. I know the king will help you return home. King Bertram is against all forms of meanness and what could be meaner than to make someone a slave?"*

It is easy to get carried away when the subject is storytelling. Sonya is right in thinking I am partial to fantasy. So is she, calling herself Ayana when she comes to visit. We've had, until now, an unspoken agreement to keep our relationship on a pretend level. Her real story would have been more dramatic than the one I wrote.

And yet, this real story often emerges more forcefully when disguised as make-believe. The day after Sonya's visit, Kesha dictates a rather remarkable story for us to act out.

> Once there was a little girl in a forest. But no one else lived there. And she was very sad. So she went out to the city. But no one understood what she was saying because she was Spanish. And then she went back to her forest and sat for days and days. Until she was so tired of sitting she just went somewhere else where there was always Spanish people so they would understand her.

After school, I call Sonya and read Kesha's story to her. "That's incredible," she says. "It's as if she listened to our conversation. She's black, right? That could have been my story only I don't speak Spanish."