

Q and A

My friend Tom likes trick questions. He'll meet someone new and find a way to ask something like, "What's the difference between a pencil?" or "Do you walk to work or take a lunch?" I thought it was really funny the first few times I heard him do it.

Tom's life is something of a trick question, or maybe a joke. He's married and they have a baby, but he has so many obviously gay male friends it makes you wonder. And I know for a fact that his grandfather is black, but he's always down on Nee-grows, as he calls them. In fact he's really sort of prejudiced about everyone who's not white. At least I've been able to get him to stop referring to Po-locks. The first time he used the word around me he didn't know I'm Polish, and when I cursed at him in Polish he just laughed, but he never said Po-lock around me again.

(Actually, what I'd really said was probably meaningless. It was just a bunch of words I'd heard my grandmother say. But I said it so that it sounded like swearing and it worked.)

Tom has a job but his wife, Lisa, hasn't worked since before they had the baby. She's always complaining about not having enough money. And they don't. She buys everything she can at the thrift store, even diapers for the baby. They can't afford the disposables, she says. She buys the cloth ones and sews buttons on them so that she won't have to worry about using pins. Velcro would be better, she says, but you can't find Velcro at the thrift store. You can get a whole bag of buttons for under a dollar, she says, and you just poke the cloth with a scissors to make a buttonhole.

I like Lisa. I'd like to be friends just with her, but I don't think she'll ever leave him. If she didn't after the time he paid to have his friend's car fixed, she never will.

It happened just before the baby was born. They live in sort of a bad neighborhood and one of Tom's friends, one of the super-gay ones, was over visiting them and had his car broken into. I don't know what they took, but Tom felt bad for his friend and paid to have the window fixed. Lisa told me about it after she found out. She said she was so mad that she threw a potted plant at him. She didn't really want to hit him, just scare him. The pot hit the wall and dirt flew everywhere. And she was about due so she was huge and she couldn't bend over to clean it up so she made him do it.

He didn't do a very good job cleaning up and I found plant dirt and leaves under the chair when I came over to help her the next day, after she called me crying and said she really needed someone. I made her a cup of tea and washed the spot on the wall, but I couldn't get all of it off. They didn't have a vacuum so I took a broom and went around the room, picking up bits of all kinds of stuff besides philodendron leaves. Tom had thrown the plant in the trash, but I found it when I emptied the dustpan. The roots hadn't dried out, so I put it into a plastic supermarket bag and took it home. It's doing fine now. I have it in a hanging basket in my kitchen.

Tom works as a salesman. He just makes commissions but he's really good at it. He has a sort of charm that just makes you trust him and want to help him out. I guess that's why we all stay friends with him, and why Lisa stays married to him despite all the questions she has, like why does he have so many gay friends and where does all the money go. She said she was surprised when she signed the tax form and saw how much he'd made last year. She asked me why, if they made that much, they're living in a bad neighborhood and she can't afford disposable diapers. It's not a trick question, and I'm not the one she should ask.

The question I should be asked, the one I should ask myself, is why I am friends with either of them. I hate to ask because I think I know the answer. Compared with Tom I am super-successful. I am tolerant and kind to others. I live in a better neighborhood. I have a job that pays a salary, not just commission. It's not as much as he makes, but at least I can account for the money I do make and I have things to show for it. Nice things. And a vacuum cleaner to help keep my place clean. When I compare myself with Tom, I feel like a real winner. But compared with Lisa, I don't come off so good. I try to think of her as a loser who's tied to a loser, but it's not like that.

There are times when I see Lisa with Tom and the baby and I see so much love. It's the kind of love that makes you willing to do anything. It's blind. It's passionate enough to make you throw things, and compassionate enough to make you sew buttons on cloth diapers, to make the best of whatever situation you're in. I've never felt that kind of love. I probably never will.

I suppose there's no reason why I have to be friends with Tom and Lisa. It's not like we're related or that we work together or anything. We just went to the same high school. Then about three years ago we ran into each others at the grocery store and said we should get together sometime and we did. That was all.

So why are we friends? What is a friend anyway? What's the difference between a friend? Should I walk to work or take a friend?

How do you answer a trick question?

~ Dianne Thomas