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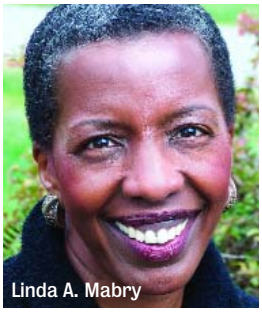
The Token

BY LINDA A. MABRY

During my 20-year career as an international trade and business lawyer, I was usually the "only one"—the only African American, the only African-American woman, or even the only lawyer of color. Sometimes I was the "first one" as well as the only one. In those rare times when there were others, we were always fewer than a handful, and even then, the "other ones"—especially the African-American women—usually moved on long before I realized that I, too, could not stay.

Initially my singular status gave me a perverse sense of satisfaction: I was doing something no one who looked like me had ever done, something everyone thought was impossible. The sense that I was special was reinforced by the acclamations that accompanied my arrival and continued presence. The venerable San Francisco law firm I joined sent out press releases announcing that I was the firm's first minority partner since its founding nearly 40 years before, and later in my career I was heralded as the second woman-of-color professor hired by one of the nation's leading law schools. My photo was usually prominently featured in publicity materials. And I could always count on being invited to participate in the dog-and-pony shows that were put on to woo clients to the firm or donors to the law school.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Over time, however, I came to understand that despite all the acclamations, the place I occupied was, in fact, far from exalted. The role I played in one of those dog-and-pony shows was a turning point for me in this regard.

It began ominously when Brad Thompson (not his real name), a senior partner at the firm, called me in to his office and said, "I hope you don't think this is an inappropriate request."

I braced myself.

"I'm putting together a group of partners to make a pitch to a potential new client," Brad said. "I'd like you to join us. I thought it would be helpful to have you along. They're in the shipping business. I know you worked for the Department of Transportation. And the new general counsel is African American."

I had clerked briefly for DOT my second year in law school but doubted that experience would put me in a position to contribute anything of substance to the meeting. I couldn't believe I was actually being asked to be the token black. I should have denounced that cheap, ignorant stunt for what it was and refused to participate, but I went along. I went along because I had worked so hard to get to where I was. I went along because I thought I needed to be a partner in a big law firm to be somebody. I went along because I wanted to belong.

"No problem," I responded with forced enthusiasm. "You know I'm always willing to help with anything that will be good for the firm."

This was the early 1990s, and business was slow. When times were hard, the boys took care of their own, and it quickly became apparent that I wasn't one of the boys. Brad was among the few at the firm who seemed to genuinely value my abilities. When I was an associate, he involved me in several big merger and acquisition deals and championed my promotion to partner. My indebtedness to Brad and despair over the lack of work overcame my deep reluctance to engage in yet another act of self-betrayal.

We met the prospective client in their East Bay office, in a well-appointed conference room overlooking the port of Oakland. Five partners from my firm were in attendance with a roughly equal number of company lawyers. Except for the African-American general counsel, all the other lawyers present were white. I was the only woman in the room. When Brad made the pitch about the firm's relevant expertise, none of which I possessed, it was clear that the only reason I was there was to tout the firm's diversity, which was practically nonexistent. In that moment, I wanted to fling myself through the plate-glass window of that well-appointed conference room overlooking the port of Oakland.

The meeting was followed by lunch in a private dining room at a nearby upscale seafood restaurant. Brad prearranged our seating, and I was mortified to find that he put me next to the general counsel. I can still see the grilled salmon resting in the bed of greens on the gold-rimmed, white china plate I stared down at through that interminable meal to keep from looking into the eyes of the black man beside me. I didn't want to see my shame reflected back. CL

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