Interlude: Pembroke, North Carolina, 1960

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INTERLUDE

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In 1960, when she became a student at Pembroke State College, my mother, Louise, lived with Miss Mary Livermore, a white Baptist “missionary,” as my mother called her. Miss Livermore’s mission work took place among Indian people who were already Christians and did not need her instruction in how to be Christian—what they needed was her time and talent to help run the churches they started. Miss Livermore had it to give and gave freely. My mother had hardly ever seen the inside of a white person’s house before going to live with Miss Livermore, so the culture shock must have been intense.

Miss Livermore expected my mother to earn her keep. My mother drove Miss Livermore, cleaned for her, and visited and prayed with convicts in the county prison camp with her. She also learned the proper carriage of a white lady in the Jim Crow South at Miss Livermore’s knee—not that my mother’s manners lacked any polish. My grandmother Ma Bloss had seen to strict instructions about Saturday nights, hairdos, clothing, hospitality, work ethic, and generosity. My mother maintains that she never learned anything new from Miss Livermore, that her lifestyle was (and still is) as good, if not better, than any white person’s. She wanted a formal education—schooling in American literature—more than schooling in how to be a white woman.

Living with Miss Livermore taught my mother more about the contradictions of white people than about their superiority. For example, Miss Livermore’s brother, Russell, was one of the county’s most powerful white landowners and businessmen. Russell ran Pates Supply, the dry goods supply store that charged interest far above the legal limit, and in collusion with local bankers he acquired more land by purchasing Indian farmers’ mortgages, putting them in debt to his store, then foreclosing on their farms when they couldn’t keep up their payments. While his chicanery earned him distrust in the Indian community, Russell also inspired respect for his willingness to treat his customers—black, white, and Indian—with gentility, if not fairness. Indians had no choice but to deal with Russell Livermore, but they embraced his sister, Mary, because
of her ties to the church, her long history of work in the Indian community, and the empathy it bred.

Mary Livermore encouraged my mother to get involved in the college’s Baptist Student Union, a predominantly Indian group whose director was a white pastor at a local Indian church. Through the BSU, my mother attended an interracial student leadership conference in August 1963. She had just turned twenty, and at the conference she had a black roommate named Jacqueline, a student at the historically black North Carolina College at Durham (which would become North Carolina Central University). Jacqueline, she told me, was the first black person she “really knew.”

From the conference, the students took a bus to attend the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The march was a singular moment for African Americans, a way for them to show that the civil rights movement was inherently patriotic—that the American dream included everyone’s right to vote and right to an education. My mother’s group arrived in Washington as dawn broke over the city on August 28. She set off marching down Pennsylvania Avenue, then separated from the marchers and went directly to the Lincoln Memorial. She watched and listened, eyes and ears alert to the rumors that groups like the Ku Klux Klan or the Nation of Islam would cause violence. “I didn’t know to feel afraid,” she said, even though she was 500 miles from home and alone the entire day. She remembers the peacefulness of Muslims, Christians, and Jews gathering together, but “it was a biracial world. You were white or you were black,” she said of that moment. She was one Lumbee nestled among a quarter of a million marchers, but “the only person who knew I was Lumbee was me,” she told me.

She remembers the words of A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King Jr., and others, but the singing made a lasting impression on her. “I’ll never forget the sound of that many people singing,” and she sang right along with them—“Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe, / That we shall overcome some day.”

Soon after college, she obtained a master’s degree in education at Appalachian State University. ASU was the only publicly funded North Carolina college, other than Pembroke, to accept Lumbees, and it did so only in the education program. A few dozen Lumbees, including both of my parents, received degrees there in the 1960s and 1970s.

After earning her master’s, my mother landed her first college teaching position in January 1968 at the all-white Carson Newman College in Tennessee. “I brought black literary figures into the classroom; the students read Cassius Clay’s poem ‘I Am the Greatest.’ These Baptist, middle-class white kids were waking up to the civil rights movement, and they were anxious to talk about
it.” But from the beginning, the school’s administrators were suspicious of her syllabus, and when Martin Luther King was assassinated in April of that year, no one at Carson Newman seemed to care. “The insensitivity to his death really affected me,” she said. She decided to leave after one semester. “I knew I was different on the inside; I was seeking a place to affiliate.”

Being Indian in a biracial world continued to affect both where and how she taught. In the 1970s she joined the faculty at NCCU in Durham. At that time, most of her black students were as new to James Baldwin and Gwendolyn Brooks as her white students at Carson Newman had been, but at NCCU she didn’t encounter any opposition to her reading list. She stayed there almost forty years. Eventually, she oversaw the transition to a multicultural humanities curriculum at NCCU, one that brought every kind of American story to her students.