

1328

LINDA – Fieldnotes – Tuesday, October 30, 2007

Subject: Kitchen Table meeting in Wilson Garden

Location: 122nd st between Douglass and Powell

Time: 12:15-2:30pm

Notes written up on Wednesday, October 31.

By the time I show up everybody who is coming that day is there: Tiffany, Xavier, and Sahara; Terry and Pai; Alice and Charlie; and a pair new to me: J.R. and Desmond. J.R. is probably in his 20s, thin, wearing a black hoodie and some sort of casual pants (jeans?). He has dark brown hair and eyes, and I think black plastic glasses. Desmond is relatively quiet, stares a lot, wide pale blue eyes and cornsilk hair. When I arrived I asked someone, maybe Tiffany, if Desmond and Charlie were brothers. Tiffany laughed and said that Desmond and Charlie just happen to be both blond and blue-eyed. She explained that J.R. was Desmond's nanny and Alice is Charlie's nanny. Alice is tall and well-proportioned, with porcelain skin, and brown hair in a pixieish cut.

Tiffany is dressed in a bright green hoodie and tight-fitting jeans. Her hair haloes around her head, no longer smoothly straightened. Her daughter Sahara is decked out in a brown-and-pink headscarf, a skirt, a pink sweater, brown tights and shoes. I note the shoes aloud, and Tiffany says that the shoes are too hard but the only soft shoes she found were \$60, so back to Payless. Alice is wearing blue jeans, a thin long-sleeve gray shirt, and later, a black puffy vest. I can't remember what Terry or the kids were wearing, but everyone but me was dressed relatively lightly, as the temperature hovered near 60 degrees.

When I arrive Pai and Xavier are tearing around the garden, as usual. Desmond sits in his stroller and Charlie stands nearby with Tiffany and Sahara. Terry is fiddling with the grill. J.R. intermittently plays with Pai and Xavier, and later with Charlie and Desmond. I introduce myself to J.R. and talk briefly about my project. J.R. tells me that Desmond's mom runs the French House [?] and lives at 116th and Amsterdam.

Tiffany explains to me that Niko is sick so Alex isn't coming. Somebody brought Sun Chips and Terry sets out the coleslaw before putting marinated chicken on the grill. I bring apples, and J.R. takes one right away.

Without Alex there is little explicit instruction, other than let's-not-throw-the-leaves-in-the-pond-anymore and let's-pick-the-leaves-on-the-ground (vs. from plants). J.R. plays catch with the bigger kids (Pai and Xavier) using a medium sized rubber ball (about a foot in diameter), and later, lets Desmond toss the ball from his perch on a white plastic chair. Later J.R. gets all the kids to sit in white plastic chairs by the pond. Tiffany watches and supports Sahara as she joyfully climbs the small bridge. Occasionally she falls, but not hard enough to cry. Xavier and Pai play around the garden as I chat with Tiffany, and later with Alice. Terry doesn't respond well to my overtures, which, admittedly, were clumsy. I say, repeating what Alex told me, I heard that you got the

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1329

Kitchen Table domain name a long time ago. Terry doesn't say much and Tiffany smoothes things over when she says that Alex "creates myths" about them.

Tiffany has a degree in English from Penn State, having started with an education major. I remark on so many of them having education backgrounds—Alex teaches, Luis works for an education nonprofit. Tiffany adds that Chester is a teacher. He started out with Teach for America. She thinks TFA is good because they get people who wouldn't go into teaching interested. I build on this saying that they pay you while they train you. She said but the training is the same as if you went to an education school (I think she named a specific one, maybe TC). She says Chester was ambivalent about homeschooling. When I nod vigorously, she says, not for the reasons you might think, but that as a public school teacher it doesn't look good if his child doesn't go to school. She told him, if we can do it we should. The kids in his school can't homeschool. We exchange assurances that homeschooling is good to do if you can. I venture, isn't it mostly evangelicals that homeschool? She confirms this and says that's why most people think homeschooling is about protecting your child from the world, with the implication that they are not.

525

At some point before we eat lunch Alice feeds Charlie from a jar of baby food. When he finishes he cries for more, or perhaps for the chips that the bigger kids are eating. Eventually Alice spoons some green mush into the baby food jar. When she feeds him with that he quiets down and eats.

Sahara talks and talks and talks while Tiffany plays with her. I ask if she talks more when Xavier is busy. She thinks about it and recalls a time when Xavier was napping and she talked and sang. At some point Sahara also plays with her stroller, wanting to push it. I ask Tiffany if Sahara has a small play stroller, and Tiffany says she hates those things. They cause a lot of problems on the playground because the kids fight over them, they love them so much. She says that Sahara gets a chance to play with them for a few minutes at the playground, and that's enough.

I get a chance to talk with Alice when I join them in the circle of chairs by the pond, and J.R. gets a call. At first I listen in on his conversation, as he tells his interlocutor that he's in the garden, it's a beautiful day, and it's so much easier to do childcare with more adults around. Meanwhile Pai and Xavier are playing, bringing paper plates of chips back and forth from the table, moving around the chairs. At first there is only one free chair, which Xavier takes. Pai wants to sit, and I offer her my chair, which Alice says is "nice." Alice tells her and Xavier to share a chair. They squeeze together. With both children eating chips from the plates they hold, Pai's elbow keeps bumping Xavier and she starts whining. I give her my chair. As Xavier eats chips Sahara whines, and quiets when Xavier gives her one. She eats slowly and quietly.

Alice and I chat in the meantime as J.R. talks, I can't remember about what, maybe my project. Then Alice's phone rings, and she answers it. J.R. moves away so they can both talk on the phone. I sit down again. After she gets off the phone Alice and I talk again. Holding Charlie in her lap, Alice shows me how Charlie moves his head in a circle when he hears noise, like a subway. Except for helicopters, when he points up. Just as she tells

1330

me this we hear a helicopter and Charlie points up. Alice coos at him that yes, there's a helicopter, and that we can't see it because there are too many trees. When we catch a glimpse of it she tries to tell Charlie, who swivels his head up but too slowly to see the helicopter through the trees.

Alice spent some time in Ghana as an undergrad on a semester abroad, doing something with schools—I didn't really hear what with all the distractions with the kids wanting attention, playing musical chairs, handing me the plate of chips. Last time the women joked about not being able to finish sentences, and I would add conversations. We move to the table to eat lunch. [I don't get the chance to ask her more about Ghana before we leave.]

The coleslaw has apples, carrots, and raisins along with cabbage. The chicken tastes spiced with black pepper. Pai eats only a couple of bites before running off. The adults talk a bit about the challenges of child-rearing, joking about getting frustrated and wanting to jump out the window. After people finish and move away from the table Sahara decides she wants an apple. She slowly takes tiny bites. Eventually she drops it onto the ground. Tiffany places it on the other side of the table, one side covered with dirt, and says she'll get back to it later. Sahara doesn't seem upset.

Terry also brings up an email that somebody sent about the "women of color—and allies" frame getting lost. Alice doesn't seem to understand. I ask what they are talking about, and Terry explains that a group of them are organizing to go to Chiapas, Mexico in December, where some women are going to talk about their work in the Zapatista movement. Before I can ask what that work is she asks me expectantly if I want to come. I tell her I'm going to Taiwan in December. I explain it's a family trip. Terry looks disappointed. [I get the sense that this is not so much that I can't come but that I don't express enthusiasm for a job like that.] Terry continues talking at Alice. [I broke in at a sensitive time. Terry is very light-skinned but recognizably a "person of color," while Alice looks very white. Terry also looks much older than Alice, not to mention that Terry is a Mother while Alice is Simply a Nanny. I wish I had let this conversation play out longer before breaking in, but I hadn't caught what was going on yet. Still haven't, of course]

559

After lunch, I play with the bigger kids. True city kids, they want to "ride the crosstown bus" to a "restaurant" that when questioned by Tiffany, is revealed to serve spaghetti and pancakes. After riding two crosstown buses (various surfaces to sit around the garden), the three of us ride the A train, then the C train, then get back on a bus. During this play I note that while Xavier makes most of the decisions, Pai asserts herself a few times. When Xavier doesn't go along with her she sometimes follows him, sometimes repeats herself, and sometimes tries another strategy. Xavier does this too but less often than Pai. Sometimes if Pai didn't want to go on the next train after Xavier declared it was time, she would say "not yet!" They would also negotiate where the next bus/train would be.

Once we made the bridge the bus, sitting on the end near the table. The three of us sat on the bridge. Tiffany smiled at us. We got up to go on another bus or train, then returned to

the bridge. Alice climbed the bridge from the pond side, wanting to get to Charlie, and Pai got upset. I stood up saying we need to get up and Alice climbed through Pai and Xavier. Pai threw herself on the ground and started yelling. Both Tiffany and Terry reacted, and I tell the kids it's like when you need to let somebody off the bus. [I don't think they are listening to me.] Pai soon quieted down, as somebody explained that Alice needed to get through to Charlie. "But it's the bus," Pai whined. Alice said something like, you need to tell me, I didn't know it was the bus. Pai gets over it almost immediately and sits me between her and Xavier on the bridge.

Xavier then decides that we needed to bring the baby with us. He grabbed Sahara's stroller. Pai then wanted a stroller too and dumped Terry's white denim jacket and purse onto the ground. "Excuuuse you!" Tiffany said, commenting that Terry wanted to keep her jacket clean. I pick up the jacket as Tiffany picked up the purse. I brushed off the jacket and put it on a chair. As the kids try to push the strollers on the uneven ground I ask Tiffany if they have a stroller policy. She shrugs.

Xavier decides that the baby is sleeping and tells us to be quiet. Somebody, maybe Tiffany asks what baby, and he waves his hand over the empty stroller. He then gets two small rocks and sets them in the stroller, showing us the babies. Tiffany jokes that Xavier is never this quiet at home.

Finally Xavier, Pai and I make it to the restaurant, the shed. Xavier and Pai wheel the strollers to the shed. Pai tries to shove her stroller into the shed and Tiffany stops her. I tell the kids they have to leave the strollers inside, there's not enough room in the restaurant. The kids squeeze inside and delightedly close the door. They find a box of plastic utensils and are disappointed when they can't find forks. I tell them to pretend the knives are forks. Pai takes two, gives another to Xavier. They start using one knife each to saw at the counter. I tell them if they want to do that they can't use so many knives. I take one knife from each of them and they saw happily. Pai says something referring to me not using my knife and I revert out of play-mode to tell them I have to make sure they don't destroy anything. Tiffany opens the door and Xavier scolds her, telling her the babies are sleeping. Tiffany repeats, ohhh, the babies are sleeping.

Outside Terry is cleaning up the lunch. Eventually she calls Pai and the kids reluctantly make their way out of the shed. I help clean up the table. As people prepare to leave J.R. offers people a newsprint magazine, "Left Turn." I think Alice takes one and I take one. I tell J.R. I've heard of "them," and he says something that I interpret as saying he's not exactly with Left Turn but writes for them occasionally. I ask him if they all do organizing work together, referring to Alice, and Tiffany says, not me. Somebody says something referring to purchasing the magazine. I make some kind of noise, like an uncertain "ohhh," and J.R. reassures me that he's not charging. Somebody jokes that the revolution will not be funded, and someone else adds, with free books.

Tiffany declares she's going to take the kids to use the bathroom. Terry doesn't want to, then asks Pai who says she does need to go to the bathroom. J.R. leaves first and barrels

33i

down 122nd street. As Tiffany and Terry stand outside with their strollers Alice decides to go to the bathroom as well. I say goodbye and leave.