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LINDA – Fieldnotes – Saturday, November 17, 2007

Subject: going with Veronica Holly to Beacon center
Location: Veronica's car, IS 195
Time: 2:30-3:30pm

Veronica and I had talked about going to visit her brother at the Beacon Center today. On Thursday she called me, about working on our project, and also about today. She told me she'd call her brother and get back to me. I didn't hear from her until today just after 2pm. She mentioned something about looking for her cat in a frustrated tone of voice and I told her to call me when she was leaving.

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She called me just before 2:30 and I missed the call since I was leaving a message for someone else. I called her back immediately and she told me she was downstairs. I told her I returned to Seth Low rather than the office, as I had told her earlier. I told her I'd come downstairs. When I came downstairs I waited for a bit and she pulled up in a silver Saturn L200. It was a nice model, with leather seats and automatic locks.

She asked me how I was and I said okay, and I asked her about her cat. She sighed heavily and said that she let her cat out last night, because she likes to go out, not outside, but out of the apartment. She said she has a brownstone, and she's on the top floor, tenants are in the middle, and her sister has the ground floor. The cat didn't come to eat this morning. So she didn't find the cat before going out to play tennis [she had told me that she had interviews to do today]. She decided that she'd put up flyers if she couldn't find her when she got back.

She found the cat in the basement, in the "basement basement," stuck behind a lot of stuff and crying. She says in a tone of voice that implies that she is working against a common assumption that cats get scared. She says she can understand how cats get stuck in trees, they need to feel secure and when it starts to move they get scared. So she got really dirty trying to free the cat.

As we drive up Broadway she asks me how's it going, and I start talking about job applications. She asks me where, and I tell her Santa Cruz, Sonoma State, etc., and she asks if I want like New York. I tell her I do but I'm not sure if Dr. Gordon can come through with the money. I say my ideal situation is that I get a job and the money comes through, I defer and get to stay in New York another year. I tell her a job is supposed to open in my department next year, but it hasn't opened yet. She asks if I like TC. I hesitate, and say, "parts of it." I say that I haven't learned how to get things done, that people who have been here for awhile know who to talk to. She nods knowingly. I say there's a lot of politics in my department, grudges going back 30 or 40 years, and she makes an impressed noise. I say that everybody is overburdened with students and people tell me not to use TC to decide if I'm going to stay in academia. She says, so it's not like other schools then? I say no, for a million reasons. She tells me she's applying to postdocs.

We turn left on 133rd St, arrive at the school and look for parking. There is a truck pulled up next to it, double-parked, with four computers lined up along the edge of its deck. The side of the truck reads "Per Scholas" on the side, plus www.perscholas.org. It also says something about computer recycling. Veronica remarks that it looks like the school is getting a donation.

[The website reads, Per Scholas is a nonprofit organization that brings computers to low-income children and families at the lowest possible price trains community residents to gain employment as computer technicians and provides environmentally responsible recycling of end-of-life computer equipment.]

The truck has a parking space behind it, catty-corner since it is double-parked. Veronica debates aloud whether she could park there, if the guys needed to use the space to unload. She parked anyway, mentioning something about her brother's truck. I ask where she's applying to postdocs and she says only UNC Chapel Hill. I don't hear the rest of her sentence as we both climb out of the car.

She tells me this is IS 195, Roberto Clemente school, gesturing west, down the block. She gestures at a building to the east, saying that a lot of the students come from that building, and that this is important. She tells me that she wasn't able to get a hold of Ronnie, but... We discuss briefly if this is the Saturday that he meant when he said it'd be a good time for me to come. We head inside and walk up a set of stairs to the gymnasium. The doors are locked, and Veronica tells me, "We gotta go around."

We walk down a long ramp as two young people come out, a girl and a guy, dressed in jeans and winter coats. Veronica is dressed in a white quilted jacket, light blue jeans, black boots, and a black sweater over white shirt with thin brown stripes. (Her coat is open over her clothes.) Her straightened hair is pulled back in a ponytail-bun.

We go inside. The walls are painted white and yellow, with lots of bulletin boards, posters, and notices posted on walls. One bulletin board lists faculty and staff at the school. A banner declares something about going to college. There are various people walking around the school, so far mostly black teenagers and older women. Meanwhile Veronica asks me again about my job search and I tell her I would love to go back to California.

We go upstairs to the Beacon office, which is closed. Veronica is surprised, and says she should have asked the young ladies downstairs. We go back downstairs and we run into a middle-aged black woman. Veronica greets her with, "Hey doll." It becomes clear that they don't know each other as the woman tells her that there's a teacher up ahead. [I note that her AAVE inflections grow heavier than in speaking with me.]

We go into a long room where a lot of families, mostly Dominican-looking, are eating chips from individual-sized bags, possibly from the vending machine in the room. One

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young light-skinned woman has a baby in a stroller that looks quite young, maybe a few weeks old. There are lots of small children that look like grade-schoolers to me, but perhaps they are middle-schoolers (on the younger end, maybe? Or maybe now I'm so old I constantly underestimate how old young people are). I don't remember seeing men in the room. Veronica spoke with a young light-skinned woman with a name tag, who responded warmly when she said she was Ronnie's brother. The young woman told us she thought Beacon was open, she saw a couple of girls earlier. She is going to be there until 5pm.

Next we go to a desk in the hallway where she chats with the security guard. He says that there are computer classes all over today, implying that maybe Beacon was cancelled. I note the notices announcing something about guns and other weapons in the school.

A heavysset light-skinned woman [who somehow looks Af-Am and not Dominican or PR] comes by with a thin dark-skinned young man and waits with a slight smile until Veronica says recognizes her and says hello enthusiastically. She tells Veronica to thank her lawyer friend—here Veronica supplies a Jewish-sounding name—and to say that everything worked out. Veronica tells her she's looking for her brother and the woman acts surprised that he's not around. She says the last time she saw him was yesterday.

As the heavysset woman is leaving, another security guard comes out of a door right by the desk. She is thickset and short, with a round shape and dark skin. She starts saying that the other security guard is spoiled, referring to the pizza he is eating off a Styrofoam plate. She loudly declares that he came in this afternoon, and she's been here since the morning. The male security guard and I are laughing.

Veronica is trying her brother on her PDA. She talks briefly with somebody and hangs up. Leaning in with a mock-confiding tone, I tell her that it's my fault because I hoped she might cancel since I'm so swamped. She tells me not to say that. She says something to the effect that he's almost always in on Saturdays. The heavysset woman confirms that it's unusual that he's not here. Veronica thanks everyone, says she thinks she tracked him down. His kids say he's out buying food.

She apologizes to me, and I say it's ok. She says, I know, I wanted you to meet so you could come back on your own. We head back to her car.

On the way home we speak about her role on the project. It turns out that she was afraid that Dr. Gordon was imposing her on us, that we wanted somebody trained in ethnography. I said not at all. I emphasized that we need somebody with time, that I want to work with students. She takes the opportunity to mention her tutoring coordinator, who is from U Texas, and is back in New York. She has some experience with data analysis, mostly quantitative, but she will work for free. She's good, Veronica tells me. She says she's interested in applying to graduate school. I get very excited and say I'd love to meet her. I tell her I have a little research money but I don't know if I can use it to pay somebody. She tells me covering expenses will be enough, and I say definitely for that.

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When we pull up to TC Veronica asks me if she has told me about Steven Fleiff. I tell her I think so, but I haven't followed up with that email she sent out. She tells me also to contact Danny Tisdale, who is the publisher of Harlem World, who will definitely make time to speak with me. I mention the one person who wrote back to her group email, and she supplies "rd," and says that he's not too reliable. She returns to Steven Fleiff, who runs their college prep program (IUME? I think he works for IUME, or at least TC). She also mentions Walter Roberts, who is in development for the Doe Fund, a city-wide organization that provides housing for homeless men. She says they clean up around Times Square, "I don't know if you've seen them," wearing orange or red. In exchange for their work they get housing. Formerly homeless men, she tells me. She says he used to work for Housing HPD, Housing Preservation and Development, so he knows a lot about housing and homelessness. I tell her that that's one of the areas we haven't looked at much yet.

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I tell her that the last time we talked I wasn't quite accurate, that we are quite busy now and that's why we need someone. She mentions Sandra O'Vera again [maybe got the name wrong], the student working with her.

At some point she tells me she saw a good movie last night, not with Brad Pitt, but the name doesn't come to her. She tells me some convoluted plot I can't follow and I don't really respond. Something about balancing work and private life.

She asks again if she already told me about Russell Schuler, founder and director of YES! I say I think I've heard of him through TC, and ask if he does youth development. She says youth education and sports—he gets teams NCAA ready. I make impressed noises, and she says yeah, NYC and NY state has the lowest number of people going to the NCAA. I make astounded noises and she says because kids aren't eligible.

She then thinks about Shirley, a lawyer she played tennis with this morning. "I forget her last name." Shirley is an attorney for Legal Aid Society. I don't react and she explains, criminal issues, you get assigned an attorney. If not criminal, like housing, then it many poor people go to Legal Aid. I nod. She muses, if I call the women I play tennis with, it might be interesting for me. She says they are all retired, but her and a teacher. Another woman, Beverly, Beverly Hemmings, works with the senior population. She thinks she does counseling, senior counseling and technical support for seniors.

I tell her that that's another area we haven't done much with yet. I tell her we're starting to be systematic and identify these areas. She says a wrapping-up-the-conversation type thing and I tell her I'll wait for her to send Shirley's last name, and also the student's information.

She says, in fact we were talking today about the Harlem Junior Tennis League, which introduces kids of color to the sport. She tells me James Blake—if I follow tennis—came through this program. I tell her that I'll ask somebody who does. Too many of the wrong kinds of kids are enrolling [in the Harlem league], and I reference the kids of the "new

people” who are moving into Harlem. She tells me, there are few tennis courts in Manhattan, and the one in Harlem is indoors. There is a fee, and some can pay and others don’t. I talk about the documentary I saw last night on urban Indians, which talked about the hordes of white people looking to enroll in tribes especially after casinos opened, for benefits, etc. I add the caveat that there are also lots of people enrolling who don’t want benefits. She asks for the name of the documentary and I tell her I can forward the name to her. When I tell her it’s a PBS documentary she says, oh, so you can get it online. [don’t know if this is true] I tell her maybe it’s a stretch to compare to the tennis league, but I tell her there is competition for resources [made scarce].

We do more “finishing the conversation” sequences, and somehow I mention Joey in California. She asks how I’m doing with the long-distance marriage and I tell her not so good. We do some personal talk about my wedding(s), how Joey and I met, which site we met on. She asks if he’s also Taiwanese, and I say yes. I go on to say I’ve dated all kinds of men as she says, “I have a bias about that.” [Oops] I talk more about how we could’ve met any other way and she takes it the other way—that she works with all women, there are no men except maybe organization psychology, it’s not like she’s in engineering. I say, and, we spend all our time at work. [I’m quite well-versed in this so-hard-to-meet-men talk.]

She warns me not to “steal” Sandra. I tell her that we’ll let her take the lead since we can’t pay her. [I should have joked back here]

[I’m glad to do this bonding-talk with Veronica, who has so far seemed quite tentative about our project and about me.]

Added Nov 20, 2007

Veronica’s family is originally from the South, I think Charlotte, N.C. She may want to go back eventually, although her nuclear family of origin is all here in Harlem.

I asked her how far Chapel Hill is from Charlotte and she said about an hour, which she says is too far to go every day. I tell her it’s enough for family occasions and emergencies.