WE SHALL OVERCOME: GROWING UP IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

By Judith Bernstein

New York City: Negroes

Like most New Yorkers, my family was apartment dwellers. We lived in a small place on Manhattan's West side and my mother, Maxine, did the cleaning and cooking. But in 1946 when I was four, we moved to a larger apartment and my parents hired a live-in maid, Lola, the first Negro I had ever seen.

I was fascinated by Lola's skin color, a deep brown. I must have driven her crazy with non-stop questions about her color. She told me that God made people all different colors and that white was just one among many. Lola loved to play games and taught me traditional Southern jump rope songs like "Down the Mississippi Where the Boats Go Push." I also remember her soft pleasant voice singing to me at nap time and the comforting feel of her arms around my waist in a hug.

I loved Lola in a way different from my mother and father and yet she felt like family. We would eat dinner together in the kitchen as I chattered away about my school day over dinner. Lola seemed amused by my stories about my schoolmates—especially 'Danny the Blimp', who she insisted was my boyfriend. And she helped me line up my collection of dolls and puppets from around the world according to their height, and taught me to crayon almost within the lines.

Although she seemed to like working for our family, Lola left to care for a sick mother and I was miserable. My mother reassured me that she would look for someone like Lola, but our next maid was her polar opposite: skinny where Lola was plump, and cranky in contrast to Lola's cheerfulness. Her name was Eliza. My father tried to get a laugh out of her by singing an old Southern song whenever he came in the kitchen: *"Oh, Eliza, little Liza Jane, Oh, Eliza, little Liza Jane*", but she never cracked a smile.

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Eliza intrigued me in spite of her off-putting behavior. She was secretive about her personal life and at age 7, I took to snooping, including peeking through the keyhole of her room. I was curious about how she would look without clothes.

When I finally caught a glimpse of Eliza in the nude, I was disappointed. What was hidden looked a lot like what was not hidden: in some places her skin was the deep brown of her arms while others were pink like her palms. Her pubic hair was like the hair on her head. As a matter of fact, she really wasn't that different from my mother. Although my insatiable curiosity was satisfied for the moment, I had a hard time controlling my urge to ask unwanted questions.

The first day of second grade I walked to Hunter College Elementary School and met my teacher. Miss Audain. She was a lanky Negro with straight hair arranged in a pageboy style. She had a dazzling smile and a confident demeanor as she welcomed us to the start of a new school year. Of course, she said nothing about her race but to us children, a Negro teacher was a novelty.

After the first day of school, I couldn't wait to tell my parents all about Miss Audain. I jabbered "Mom, our teacher is a Negro. She's so beautiful. She has a diamond ring and says she's engaged."

My mother's only question was "Is she nice?" and my father (Nahum) asked, "Is she a good teacher?" She was both and our class was crazy about her. When I discovered a florist shop nearby, I begged my parents for money to buy her flowers--- bouquets of irises, roses and tulips. Miss Audain seemed pleased but suggested that I only bring flowers on special occasions. I managed to find quite a few of these: Halloween; Valentine's Day; and St. Patrick's Day when I brought green carnations.

Sadly for us, Miss Audain announced at the end of third-grade that she was leaving our school to get married. I couldn't understand what one thing had to do with another: why couldn't

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she be married **and** our teacher? It seemed small compensation that she invited my classmates and our parents to her June wedding.

My parents accepted the invitation and told me that the church where she would be married was in Harlem. I had no idea what and where Harlem was, but I got the impression that going to Harlem was unusual for our family. I was excited to go to my first wedding. What would Miss Audain wear? What was a "bride's maid? Was she a maid like Lola or Eliza? Would other students be there? Was Miss Audain's husband a Negro?

When the wedding day finally arrived, we drove to Harlem and parked about eight blocks from the church. I noticed how different the neighborhood was from our own. There were four-story houses with steps in front. Lots of kids, all Negroes, played right in the street, roller skating or throwing a baseball. Someone had opened the fire hydrants and kids were dashing in and out of a gush of water, clearly having a great time. Street vendors announced what they were selling: Italian shaved ice in rainbow colors, fruit; knife sharpening services. Harlem was noisier and not as clean as downtown where we lived, but it was much livelier.

The church was almost full by the time we got there. I saw a few of my classmates with their parents, but most of the people were Negroes who were very dressed up, so I was glad I had worn my blue taffeta party dress. It was very hot in the church and a lot of the women had brought fans and were vigorously waving them. Finally, the organ began to play and excitement rippled through the pews. Then, two girls about Miss Audain's age started down the aisles. I could hardly restrain myself:

"Look at the beautiful pink dresses, Mommy! Ooh, they're so pretty. Do you think they are taffeta like mine? Aren't they hot in those long dresses?" Some heads swiveled in our direction and my mother hushed me.

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The girls in pink were followed by a set in blue. At last the music shifted to “Here Comes the Bride” and we all turned toward the back of the church. A gray-haired man walked arm-in-arm down the aisle with a white-gowned Miss Audain. She was regal, resplendent in a long dress embroidered with pearls. A little girl who looked barely old enough to walk scattered rose petals on the carpet.

For the rest of the ceremony, the intense heat distracted me. One of the bridesmaids fainted and was carried out of the church. Finally, it was over and we trooped down to the cool basement to drink iced lemonade and eat the multi-layered cake that had, to my amazement, a Negro bride and groom on top. Then we went outside the church to wish Miss Audain and her husband, Bill, good luck. My mother cautioned me, “When we get to the front of the line, just shake the bride and groom’s hands and say ‘congratulations’ “. Instead, I blurted out to Miss Audain, “You look so beautiful!”, but then got tongue-tied. She smiled, reached down and gave me a hug. “Thank you, Judy, I’m going to miss you”.

When they got in a car, we threw rice and waved until the car was out of sight. I asked my parents if we could visit Miss Audain when she came back from her honeymoon. “I don’t think so, pumpkin”, they answered and looked sad. I sensed it would be better not to ask questions. I was quiet during the drive home as reality sunk in. I wouldn’t see Miss Audain again. I wished I had told her that I was going to miss her too.

The Suburbs: The Help

“This is the servants' quarters” said the realtor as she opened a nondescript door and beckoned us to follow her. “Why is there a 'servants' quarters'*?* I whispered to my father. “Do we have servants?” “I'll tell you later”*,* he said, saving his explanation for another time.

The quarters' hall was musty and its dark brown carpet worn. There were several small

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rooms that the realtor said could be used as a sitting room and a bedroom, and there was a miniscule bathroom. Although they were cramped, the rooms were bright and overlooked the forest at the rear of the house. The servants' quarters had some odd features including a buzzer system that connected with the master bedroom and the kitchen, so that the servants could hear what their employers wanted.

I was nine, my sister Joan five, and my baby brother Seth two when my parents bought large, sprawling, pink stucco house, convinced that a country upbringing would be better for children than Manhattan. I didn't think so. I loved New York City—its 24-hour street life, the Italian organ grinders, the department store, Best's, that had a beauty salon just for children, and the Haydn Planetarium with its shows about the stars and planets.

Although the house in Rye was too big for one maid, we still asked Eliza to come with us. Cantankerous as she might be, I had become attached to her and assumed she would come with us to Rye. However, no amount of begging on my part and an offer of a higher salary from my parents would sway her:

"I'm not going to a place in the country with wild animals running around, it's uncouth."

When I finally said good bye to Eliza, she permitted me a first and last hug. I cried myself to sleep for months afterward. Eliza was part of our family and I felt the loss.

Once we settled in, my mother and father were overwhelmed by the 16 room house and decided to hire a couple to live in the servants' quarters and work as maid, butler, chauffeur and baby-sitters. My mother, who had been raised with no help must have gotten the idea of what was needed from mansions and their help shown in the Hollywood movies she saw in the 30's as a teenager.

Margaret and James, Negroes from Virginia, were new to household service. Margaret

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was petite, with a quick smile and James was husky, with a football player build. They were affectionate with us, especially to my brother, still a toddler.

We siblings picked one person among the help to be our special friend. My brother's friend was James who loved to tease him and our beagle, Patches. My sister who was always outside, got friendly with the gardener, Cosmo. I chose Maybelle, the Negro laundress, as my special friend. When she came to iron, I often sat with her in a small room a few steps above the kitchen. She was rotund and short, her feet barely reaching the floor from the chair where she sat to iron for hours. Maybelle liked to talk to make the ironing go faster. She told me many stories of her upbringing in rural Georgia and I told her about my life in New York City.

After two years with us, Margaret and James announced they were leaving. Margaret was pregnant and James explained that they wanted a place of their own. We all begged them to stay. My father offered a higher salary and my mother told Margaret she could work part-time but they had made their decision.

I was still too young to understand their need for a home of their own to bring up a baby, and felt the same stab of loss as when Lola left and Eliza stayed in the city. My brother was especially hard hit by the news as he spent the most time with them. Even Patches, our beagle, liked to follow them around the house as they worked.

The attachment we children had to our help is hard to explain. They were not relatives, but to us they weren't “servants”. Our live-in couples were special friends and confidants. They listened sympathetically to our ups and downs and gave us advice when we seemed to need it, and a hug when we were in tears over some small setback. We had a closeness that was different from our relationship with our parents and relatives. They saw us children warts and all--- which is to say messy rooms, temper tantrums, and whining about trivia--- and still loved us. Maybe

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because they weren't in a position to scold or discipline us, we felt freer to confide in them than in our parents.

The South: Segregation

My first visit to the South was taken in ignorance. In 1953 when I was eleven, I had never heard of segregation. My mother would stay home with the younger kids and my best friend, Kate, would come with me and my father. On the way to D.C., our destination, my father suggested that we stop in Baltimore to visit a sports arena he had invested in. And although arena's roller skating rink wasn't open to the public on a weekday, the manager would let us in. Of course we wanted to stop.

Baltimore had a different feel to it than New York. Even though we were in the center of town, there were small houses with stoops and people sitting out on porches. It reminded me of Harlem. When we arrived at the rink, I looked up at the marquee that advertised coming attractions: "*Sunday night: Whites only roller-skating; Monday night: Colored*". I had never seen a sign like that in New York. What did this mean?

My father explained: "In Maryland and other states in the South, Negroes are called 'colored people'. The white people and colored people don't go to the same schools, or shop at the same stores, or roller skate together. The Negroes have their own schools and if there is only one skating rink in town, they take turns using it with white people."

"But why? Why do they have to be by themselves? Suppose they can only go on Sunday and it's a 'whites only' day? Suppose they live in the same neighborhood as whites. Wouldn't they go to the same school? I was full of 'supposes' and only relented for the hour we had the freedom of the huge rink for just the three of us.

Throughout the trip, I constantly questioned things. Why were there *"No Colored*" signs

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outside restaurants and stores? Why could Negroes wait on us and clean our room at the Hotel Washington but not eat or stay at the hotel? During our visit to the Lincoln Memorial I asked: "If the Negroes were freed in 1865 when Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, why are they still treated different from white people?" My father agreed that these things were true and were unfair and wrong, but he didn't think that change was coming to the South any time soon.

One afternoon we drove out into the Virginia countryside to visit Thomas Jefferson's home, Monticello. Kate and I marveled over the rooms with their European furniture and carpets. My father was impressed by the brilliance of the architecture and landscaping. But I was troubled by the fact that Monticello had a large "slave quarters".

Our guide said that aside from the time they spent working in the house, slaves lived separately from their owners. Their quarters had tiny cabins, a "slave kitchen", and outhouses. I was shocked to find out that slaves were "owned" by their "masters". What upset me most was that wives, husbands and children could be sold to different owners and there was nothing they could do about it. I first heard the expression "sold down the river" at Monticello.

What I saw of the South did not reassure me that things had gotten that much better in the nearly one hundred years since slavery ended. I was a smug Northerner. Prejudice and segregation existed only in the South as far as I knew. In the North I saw few wrongs to right.

When I was thirteen, my father invested in a motel, The Wanderer, on Jekyll Island, Georgia. Because the South--- and therefore the motel--- was segregated, I flatly refused to go there on family vacations. This caused some heated family arguments. My mother's attempts to convince me to join them centered on practical matters; my father's pleas were on moral grounds.

"Judy", my father argued, "I want to see an end to segregation as much as you do. You

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know I support the NAACP (National Association of Advancement for Colored People). I hate segregation; it's wrong. It reminds me of when the Jews were slaves in Egypt. But what can I do? Segregation is the law *i*n the South and I'm a lawyer. I have to honor the law even when it's unjust. The day that the South puts an end to segregation, I will welcome Negroes with open arms. But I can't instruct the manager to let Negroes register when it's against the law in Georgia." But he didn't tell me why he had invested in a Southern motel in the first place if he opposed segregation.

I put my foot down: "I'm not going to Georgia until Negroes can stay at our motel." I stayed home with Louis and Margie, our live-in couple, while the rest of the family was on vacation. I ate with them in the kitchen, sometimes chatting about my school activities and friends, other times in silence while I poured over an "Archie" comic book. Unlike my younger brother, Seth, I had only gone to the "servants' quarters" on a few occasions when my parents were out. But with an empty house, I found reasons to visit.

I watched television with them in their small living room and this got around the awkwardness by giving us a common subject to talk about. We watched Ed Sullivan's "Show of Shows", featuring a variety of comics, singers and performances; it was a favorite in the 50's that cut across race and class.

My curiosity ran the gamut: Had they changed the furnishings my mother had provided? Were there signs of their life outside our house---photographs, letters, and mementos? Yes, there were photographs of family and my asking about them gave Louis and Margie an occasion to talk about their own lives, the first time I had heard something personal. They showed me framed photos of their large families and explained that they both had grown up in the same rural Maryland County and moved up North since they heard that Negroes had a whole lot more

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opportunity. I hoped that was really the case but had my doubts and kept quiet.

When my family returned from Georgia, they made it clear that I had missed a wonderful vacation and, surprise, a chance to stand up for Negroes. It seemed my father had used the occasion of a Passover Seder--- the commemoration of the time when Moses led the Jewish people out of bondage in Egypt--- to tell the Jewish community that they unless they spoke out against segregation they were cowards and even accomplices to oppression.

He first gave an eloquent history of the Jewish bondage in Egypt and then launched into a rendition of a Negro spiritual: *"When Israel was in Egypt Land, Let my people go! Go down Moses, Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go!"* He concluded with a rousing exhortation, saying that by going along with an unjust system, they were supporting it:

"We were an oppressed people, we were slaves; we struggled for years to reach the Promised Land. Our people barely survived the Holocaust. Millions died because people went along, didn't speak out, and didn't take risks. We of all people should understand and support the struggle against injustice in the South and the North."

I had to admit that he had been incredibly brave (what "chutzpah"!) to make that speech. He was an outsider. Maybe he had no idea of what it would be like to be a Jew in the South. If we lived there, would he speak out in a hostile community that had no great fondness for Jews and where the Ku Klux Klan was still lynching people? I had to think, knowing him, he would. I was humbled. But after the trip to D.C., I never went to the South again while segregation laws were in effect.

The March on Washington for Freedom, Peace and Justice

In 1963, I was a junior at Brandeis University and during the summer, I worked as a receptionist in mid-town Manhattan. One morning, I was reading the "New York Times" when

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an article caught my attention: college students from the North were spending the summer in the South to help with a Negro voter registration drive. Compared to the work those students were doing, my job seemed unimportant.

A few days later, my father announced that there was going to be a demonstration for civil rights in Washington, D.C. that would draw people from all over the country. My reaction was *"Let's go!"* But would we go on our own?

After asking around, he discovered that the local chapter of the NAACP, a group he supported, had chartered a bus and we could join them. The bus would leave the nearby town of Port Chester at 6 AM.

My father suggested that since the hour was so early, Charles, our Negro chauffeur, could drive us to the meeting place. I was outraged: "There is no way I am going to arrive at the NAACP bus driven by a Negro chauffeur!" My embarrassment threatened to cancel our trip.

Luckily, my mother saw the situation from my viewpoint and stepped in:

"I don't mind getting up early this once to take you. I'm so proud of you both so let's not get sidetracked over how you get TO the bus. The important thing is to get ON the bus. Now what would you like for a bag lunch?"

I had trouble sleeping the night before the march. I was nervous about going with my father. We had argued about politics a lot that year, especially about the Cuban missile crisis. I worried that we might start squabbling on the bus about this and other hot topics.

But fighting with my father wasn't my only worry. I wondered if we would be the only white people going with the group. If that were the case, would the others be thinking, "Oh, great, they're going to support us on the march but how would they feel about their kids being friends with our kids? Or dating them?"

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These thought ate at me. I wondered how my parents would react if I were to seriously date a Negro. The previous year I had been friends with a student from South Africa and my parents were somewhat worried. My mother had commented,

"I'm glad you have friends from other countries. But don't get too serious. We hope that you'll marry someone with a similar background to ours. We support integration and equal rights, but dating and inter-racial marriage would only bring you troubles in the times we're living in." Idealistic me hoped that the march would change those times.

After a sleepless night, I got up at 5 AM and dressed. I put on nice clothes, tailored blue cotton pants and a long-sleeved white blouse, sensing that this was going to be an important day. It was still dark when we left the house and the streets were empty. My father seemed calm, as if we were on the way to the movies or a baseball game. Maybe he was also nervous but we didn't talk about our feelings.

When my mother dropped us off, the street was full of people milling around and chatting. There was a tangible buzz of excitement. We saw that we were, in fact, the only white people there. But right away a tall man came over to greet us. My father didn't miss a beat: "I'm Nahum Bernstein and this is my daughter Judy. We're so glad to be with the NAACP today".

"I'm Jim Johnson", the man answered, pumping my father's hand. "We're so pleased you joined us. Now let me introduce you to some other folks." He did and by the time we boarded the bus we were on a first name basis with half the group. If I still wasn't completely comfortable, it wasn't due to the others; their warmth and acceptance seemed completely genuine.

At first, snoring and whispering were the only sounds on the bus, but as we pulled out of the Holland Tunnel into New Jersey, we were amazed to see the highway lined with people waving signs saying *"Go tell it on the mountain!" "God speed!" "Freedom now!"* and *"We*

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shall overcome!” Hundreds of people, Negro and White, were waving and cheering us on. My eyes watered and my throat felt tight. I was so proud of our group, the people lining the highway and of my father for suggesting we go on the march. I turned to look at him and he, too, was tearing up. It was the first time I had ever seen him cry.

The crowds were the same all along the route to D.C. If there was opposition to the march and what it stood for (and of course there was or we wouldn't have to march!), it wasn't visible that morning. Just a groundswell of togetherness, in a country that had suffered so much anger and violence over the struggle for civil rights.

When we arrived at the Washington Mall, our NAACP group settled under a shady tree. For a few hours, we sat and listened to speakers, singers and choirs. There was folk music and gospel songs sung by church choirs and the famous singer Mahalia Jackson. In between the musical numbers were speeches by gifted orators such as civil rights leaders Whitney Young, John L. Lewis and Roy Wilkins .They spoke eloquently of the long struggle to achieve equal rights guaranteed in the Constitution but still so far from being a reality for Negroes. The marchers responded with clapping, foot stomping and shouts of affirmation. Vendors sold hot dogs and pop. There was laughter, sadness and celebration.

The afternoon was sweltering, so I wandered off to find a cold Coke. On the way, I saw an immense crowd of people, stretching from the Lincoln Memorial to the Washington Monument. I noticed the incredible mix of humanity: young children and very old people; labor unions, churches and schools; men and women dressed in their Sunday best and farmers wearing overalls, college students like myself, Negroes, Whites, and Native Americans.

As I took my first sip of coke, I heard a resonant, deep and somewhat familiar voice. Many times the speaker was interrupted by shouts of “That's right!” and “You tell them!” But

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when Dr. Marin Luther King Jr. began to speak of his own children and of future generations, there was silence:

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the contents of their character. I have a dream today!"

The beauty of his words and power of his voice stunned me. I was rooted to the spot, transfixed. I have to admit I cried and I wasn't the only one with tears streaking my face. Then I made my way back to our group. I took my father's hand and the hand of the person on my other side. We joined with the hundreds of thousands at the march in singing the civil rights movement's anthem: "*We Shall Overcome*".

This wasn't the first time I'd sung this song of hope and it wasn't the last. But this was an occasion on which the "***we***" of *"We shall overcome"* seemed true. And not only for those of us on the March but for every person in the United States who knew what was right, and that felt like a whole lot of people.

As the sun was setting, the tired members of our group greeted each other at the maple tree and boarded the bus for the ride home. I slept peacefully next to my father with my head on his shoulder. Our relationship had changed that day, and so had my understanding of freedom, peace and justice.

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