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EXCERPTS FROM *POURIN' DOWN RAIN*[1]

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DURING A RECENT COMMITTEE MEETING where a group of women were working on some documents, I mentioned that I wanted to be cautious about the wordsmithing. "Published words live forever," I said. One of the women responded in genuine distress: "Surely our writing has to be taken in the context of the day. Do we have to worry about what people will think of us fifty years from now?"

The world moves on, things change, and our knowledge grows. Writers are no different from others in their experience of change, but we are set apart by the fact that our words, frozen in time, reveal our past ignorance.

When I started writing *Pourin' Down Rain* in 1985 there was no Internet and very little printed material documenting the experiences of western Canada's Black pioneers. The elders of the community weren't accustomed to thinking of their stories as interesting or of historical relevance. They feared exposure and backlash. I had to perform cartwheels and

headstands to get people to talk about the past—with the exception of my Great-aunt Daisy. But even she, like the others, didn't want to talk about racism.

Those are the reasons—and there may be others—that *Pourin' Down Rain* seems incomplete to me now. But the upside to the passage of time and the long-term exploration of a topic is that we sometimes get to witness the change we work to create in the world. Elderly former residents of Alberta and Saskatchewan's Black pioneer communities now appear to feel honoured by the attention my work and the work of other historians has brought to their stories, and I've had the opportunity to witness their dignified presence at events where their lives have been celebrated. Some speak more freely about both the joys and sorrows of Black Canadian life and don't seem to fear that talking will lead to reprisals.

These pages are excerpts, dealing with my family's physical and psychological cross-border experiences spanning several generations and decades. But they were written twenty years ago, based on the knowledge I had at that time. As you peruse them, know that in the distant and recent past, many Black citizens were refused service in Canadian prairie restaurants, hotels and recreational facilities, and that a group of supremacists conducted a cross-burning in Alberta in 1990, the same year *Pourin' Down Rain* was published.

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OUR STREET CONTAINED the closest thing to a Black community that one would find in Calgary in 1961. Ricky Hayes' parents were biracial, but he, his brother Randy and sister Debbie considered themselves Black. The Hayes', their grandparents across the alley, my family and the Saunders and Lawson families up the road comprised what I believe was the largest concentration of Black people in a single Calgary neighbourhood.

My parents had an attitude of kinship toward the other Black families on the street. The families knew one another, they knew each other's parents and grandparents, and probably because of that "knowing,"

they communicated to us our connection to other Black children. We played together. Without isolating ourselves from the other children in the neighbourhood and without any discussion of it, we sensed a link that transcended our environs.

Across the street from our house was another field which we had to cross to reach the railroad tracks leading to the twin bridges, the Bow River, and ultimately, to the paths that took us "up in the hills."

Most summer days we spent meandering along the tracks to the river, the usual goal being a picnic in the hills. The picnic, however, was not really the point. The point was the adventure we would sometimes encounter along the way.

On a very warm day, if there was no breeze, the heat from the iron rails and sharp smell of oil and metal bouncing up into our faces would drive us down from the tracks to walk through the high grasses. This meant slower going, but it was good to sniff the flowers instead of the heat and to dig around what someone would insist was a badger hole.

From the first time my brothers pronounced me old enough to go along with them, until I was sixteen and we moved from Bowness, the journey along the tracks to the river, across the bridges and up into the hills was real life. It was the meeting place, it was where we went to talk and light campfires, it was something we did that our parents did not do.

Across the alley from us lived two children, a brother and sister, who never joined the treks to the hills if we and the Hayes children were going. Their father forbade them from associating with us, and effectively ostracized his children from the rest of the neighbourhood by prohibiting them from joining any games where we Black children were present. When groups formed for kick-the-can or softball, we were often aware of these two children's eyes peering out from the cracks in their fence. They were there, we were aware of their presence, and in retrospect, their loneliness seems palpable.

When I was young, I was minimally aware that racism was a special problem. People who shared our neighbour's prejudices seemed so rare and to have so little effect on my life that I did not attribute their bigotry to a world condition.

My mother had implanted in the minds of my two older brothers, my younger sister and myself that we were special, not ordinary in any way. She would refer to our bigoted neighbour with utter contempt, as "the likes of him," implying that his ideas and his two unfortunate children were unworthy of our time or thoughts.

The diligence of our mother freed the minds of me and my siblings from the self-hatred that can cripple Black children born in ghettos.

Still, even a fiercely proud mother's constant reassurances cannot protect her Black child from learning, sooner or later, that skin is a badge you will always wear, a form of identification for those in the world who wish to brand you.

One afternoon upon returning from school I overheard my mother talking on the telephone to Mr Leavitt, the principal of my elementary school. He was calling to plead with her to try to persuade Floyd Hayes to discourage his children from fighting at school. Floyd was the brother of my mother's twin sister's husband and the father of the aforementioned friends, Randy, Ricky and Debbie.

"I'm afraid that I can't agree with you, Mr Leavitt," she was saying. "I'm not going to tell them how to handle their problems. They came from a place where they can't fight. Where they come from a Black person doesn't have a chance against racists, and if Mr Hayes has decided his children are going to fight name-calling with their fists, that's up to him."

When my mother replaced the receiver on its hook on the wall, I pestered her with questions. What did Mr Leavitt want? Why had he called her? Were Randy and Ricky in trouble? What did she mean when she said Floyd had come from somewhere else where they couldn't fight it? Fight what?

"Jim Crow. They couldn't fight Jim Crow down there, but he's determined he's going to fight it here."

"Who is Jim Crow?"

"It's not who, it's what. It's called Jim Crow when Black people aren't allowed to ride at the front of the bus, or drink from the same fountains as Whites."

"Jim Crow?" I repeated. "Jim Crow. Where is the Jim Crow?"

"Kansas. Floyd and them were all born in Kansas."

If Floyd "and them" were all born in Kansas, that meant that my Uncle Allen, Floyd's younger brother, had been born there too, and that he had lived with this Jim Crow.

"Is Kansas in Canada?" I asked nervously.

"No, oh no," my mother said. "We don't have that kind of thing here. Kansas is in the States. Allen and Floyd and them never went to the movie houses when they were kids, not because they didn't believe in it, but because nobody was going to tell them that they had to sit up in the balcony or at the back. They came to Canada to get away from that, and they figure they're not going to tell their kids to stand by while anyone calls them 'nigger' either."

My mother was clearly quite agitated by Mr Leavitt's call. I knew that she would repeat the entire conversation, with some embellishment, to her sisters Pearl and Edie on the telephone later that evening.

As for me, I was relieved to learn that Kansas was not in Canada. Here was yet another story, another horrific tale of life in "The States," fuelling my growing belief that I was lucky to have been born in Canada.

Only short days before Mr Leavitt's call I had learned that my grandparents, my mother's father and mother, had also once lived in America.

The discovery came to me when I asked my mother to explain why my grandpa was White, yet his brother, Uncle Buster, was Black.

My grandfather was something less than five feet, ten inches tall. He had grey eyes, he wore glasses over his long, narrow nose and he was light-skinned.

He had been called George Washington Smith at birth, but upon joining the Canadian Army in 1919 he revealed the full extent of his embarrassment over the name and lied to his commanding officer, saying that his middle initial stood for Willis. Thereafter, he was known as George Willis Smith and that is how I knew him.

I believe he possessed an average build, although it is difficult to be certain as he always dressed in loose clothing, in particular a pair of grey-beige pants and a yellow shirt.

He had a deep voice and a low, rolling, rumbling laugh. He began most sentences with the phrase, "Well, ya take." He called his five sons

"Son," his four daughters "Daughter" and he sometimes called me "Granddaughter."

He would say, "Well, ya take, Granddaughter, I don't yodel when big girls (referring to my grandmother, who was singing in the kitchen) are listenin'. I only yodel for special small girls."

He was born in Chandler, Oklahoma, on October 31st, 1897. When I say that he was light-skinned, I mean that his skin color was indistinguishable from that of any White person.

That is why, in 1963 when I was seven years old, I asked my mother how he could be White and his brother be Black.

She turned and stared at me. "Your Grandpa is not White."

"He is," I said.

I went to the china cabinet and took the photograph of my grandparents with their children taken on the occasion of their fortieth wedding anniversary. Carefully, I took it to my mother and placed it in her hands.

"Look."

My mother took the picture and brushed it gently, wiping away imaginary dust.

"He has very fair skin, honey, but he isn't a White man. What he would say if he knew his grandchildren thought so!" She was very amused and continued, "You see, just look at his hair."

I looked, but seeing nothing remarkable about his metallic-grey, brushed-back hair, did not speak.

"You're not going to find any White man on earth with hair like that," she said. "Daddy has him some bad hair."

"Bad" was how she described any head of hair, like my brother Richard's or my cousin Sharon's, that was very tight and nappy. She frequently caused me considerable grief by comparing my hair with my sister's, whose loose and supple hair qualified as "good hair."

I continued to gaze glumly at the photograph in my mother's hand. I was embarrassed at having been wrong about my grandfather. There he sat, beside my dark-skinned grandmother, to whom all along I thought he had been blissfully and interracially married.

"Grandma is Black." I finally said.

"Uhhm hmm, no one would ever mistake your grandmother for White. Daddy and Mama used to run into trouble when they went back to the States. If Daddy wears a hat, you see, he can't lay claim to his heritage. He used to wonder why nobody bothered him when he went into the White areas.

"Once, Mama and Daddy went to Oklahoma to see Mom's relatives. They'd been shopping and made plans to meet in a restaurant for lunch. Daddy got there first, took a table and told the waiter that he was waiting for his wife. He didn't take his hat off until he sat down. When Mama got there she joined Daddy at his table, but no one came to take their order. The waiter walked all around them, just like they weren't there. He acted like he was deaf when Daddy said 'Excuse me.'

"Finally a person came from the kitchen and whispered, 'I'm sorry, but we won't be able to serve you today.'

"Daddy was shocked. He was a young boy when they left the States and had forgotten what it was like there. He really got angry. He stood up and said, 'You sure were planning to serve me before I took my hat off.' He started to go toward the man, but Mama stopped him. 'No George, let's just get our things and go,' she said, 'We don't need for you to land up in jail down here.' Mama and Daddy got out of there and shook the dust of that place off of their feet. Daddy's never gone back again, never again."

Knowing my grandparents to be the gentle, lovely people that they were, I couldn't imagine what kind of madness would cause them to be treated in such a manner. I began to fear the very words whenever I heard someone refer to "The States." I vowed that I, like my grandfather, would not bother to darken America's doorstep.

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VARIOUS MINORITIES will occasionally experience periods of trendiness in North America. An event or string of events in a foreign country will trigger the onset of a phenomenon such as the Nehru jacket. Fashions in hair and clothing will reflect the influence of the season's

foreign culture of choice. Suddenly, even people who despise cooked fish will know everything there is to know about sushi. Japanese models will sprinkle the pages of *Vogue*.

In the early seventies, North American Blacks experienced our episode of modishness, or what we referred to then as being "in."

Even our neighbours in Bowness had heard that "Black is Beautiful." Comics like George Carlin and groups like the Rolling Stones were bragging about their Black connections. White bands wore afros, White students at Bowness High School followed suit and played blues on their harmonicas in the courtyard.

It was a short-lived time, but fortunately for me occurred during my adolescence. While undergoing the standard severe pain of being fourteen, I had my newly "cool" blackness to give me a sense of purpose.

I felt noble the night that I decided I would no longer straighten my hair. I was going natural. Bolstering my confidence was the shriek of delight that I elicited from Sharon when I informed her of my decision and displayed my afro to her. Her approval more than compensated for the titters that greeted me when I walked into my classroom at school the next day. My resolve to demonstrate that I was "Black and Proud" in the way that James Brown described in his song was only cemented when a classmate shouted "Cheryl, did you stick your finger in an electrical outlet?" and my fellow students burst into laughter.

My older brothers and I had begun what could not actually have been considered dating, as that word implies actually going out somewhere, but what might be considered "pre" dating. Our forays into relationships with the opposite gender consisted of eating lunch with that person in the cafeteria, going to Bowness Park or Market Mall to hold hands during spares, or perhaps meeting on weekends to play records.

The average citizen of Calgary found biracial dating to be a great curiosity and passers by in vehicles would often strain their necks to ogle us if we ventured onto public streets in physical contact with a White friend of the opposite sex.

This was such a frequent occurrence that, in all honesty, I had ceased to take note of it until the advent into my life of a fellow student of

Bowness two years older than I, named Brian. I had met Brian at a camp for elementary school students which the two of us had been selected to attend as counsellors. We had been mutually intrigued. He informed me, for some reason, in the early stages of our attraction, that his father and grandfather were bigots. I was taken aback by this pronouncement, but as Brian indicated total disagreement with their views and clearly seemed intent upon pursuing our relationship, I shrugged it off.

When our week in the foothills camp ended and we returned to the city, I noticed that Brian was very disturbed by the stares we encountered on the street, blushing and becoming fidgety. I decided after a week or two that we should discuss his discomfort.

"Doesn't it bother you?" he asked me.

"Well, I don't like it, but what am I supposed to do, run after a car shouting, 'Hey, don't look at us?'"

"I don't know," he replied. "It just gives me the creeps."

We did not return to the topic again.

A week later, Brian did not appear at our usual morning meeting place at the school. When I saw him later, between classes and walked toward him smiling, he ignored me and hurried past. I stood in the hallway, stunned.

Over the next days I retained hope that Brian would explain his actions, but gradually I had to accept that he had rejected me utterly and did not wish to tell me why.

Had his parents learned of our friendship and forbidden it? Had a friend of his chided him regarding me? Was he simply unable to continue tolerating the curiosity of strangers? I do not know the answers to these questions now, nor does Brian know of the tremendous impact that our brief encounter has had upon my life.

Had I been older, or younger, I may have been more rational about my ordeal with Brian. As it was, already crippled by the daily horror of adolescence, I felt as though Brian had pierced my life with a poison dart.

I believed that I had only myself to blame for what had happened. I had trusted when I should not have done so. I had been drifting through my life with closed eyes.

I was not Black enough, I concluded. Too many years in a White world had caused me to forget, once too often, that I was Black and that my blackness was the first thing seen and reacted to by every white person that I met and that many, many people would never see beyond my skin. Whether I liked it or not, the world was Black and White and I had been attempting to live in the middle.

I began to retreat from what I perceived to be "White culture." I immersed myself in the literature of Black authors, became fascinated by the history of Black Americans and was attracted to Black music that reflected a "revolutionary" message. I no longer believed that Canada was a refuge from racism and resented being raised in isolation from other Blacks.

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ON APRIL 16TH, 1912, my great-aunt Daisy celebrated her fifth birthday at a tiny train station in a town called Delmenie, Saskatchewan.

That day, she said, it was "pourin' down rain. It was pourin' down rain when we pulled out of the station in Oklahoma and it was pourin' down rain when we pulled into Delmenie, Saskatchewan."

She had been travelling with two older sisters and two older brothers, and the five of them were greeted by their mother and eldest sisters, Maude and Mary. They walked to a house that someone in town had rented, and as Daisy dashed from beneath the protection of their umbrellas to pick flowers that she saw growing along the path, her mother despaired, calling out to the little girl that she would "catch her death."

It had been more than two years from the time that my great-grandfather Rufus had announced that the family would leave Oklahoma to live in Canada, and almost two years since the family had been together. Rufus had arrived in Saskatchewan in 1910, along with hundreds of Black American farmers, mostly Oklahomans. He, like his fellow immigrants, was given a parcel of land, 160 acres, for the filing fee of ten dollars. He built a cabin and began to make preparations for the arrival of his wife and twelve children, who would come in twos and threes until the

summer of 1912. Then, they would begin to live in their new world, as Canadians.

My great-grandfather transplanted his family approximately ten times in the waning years of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries. He was restless—nervous about the welfare of his children living Black in an increasingly hostile society. Especially after his parents' deaths (Jackson Smith on December 12, 1892 and Mary Smith on March 7, 1893) he no longer felt tied to his birth state, Arkansas. He, along with multitudes of former slaves, drifted into two districts known then as "Indian Territory" and "Western Territory," lands that, although within the boundaries of the United States of America, were not states. Black people could vote in the territories.

This attempt to remain a step ahead of total denial of human rights was only a mediocre success for Rufus Smith and his peers. Blacks could vote in the territories, but they were not welcome there. Lynchings and house burnings were as common in the territories as elsewhere, but Black people, cornered, believing that they must seize their humanity in the territories or be crushed, fought their enemies with every means available to them. Black men, including my great-grandfather, joined the Socialist Party of America, which at first promised to uphold them. The Socialist option proved to be a disappointment for Blacks when the party, reluctant to alienate poor White farmers and labourers, began to renege on its early commitment to Black concerns.

Frequent armed encounters between Blacks and Whites prompted Rufus Smith to move from town to town in the Indian Territory—from Wagoner to Bristow, to Fischer and finally to Tulsa, where the Smith family settled into a white house with a fence, on Frankfurt Avenue. This is where they were living in 1910 when Blacks lost voting privileges, three years after the territories had been merged into a state called Oklahoma.

At precisely the same time the Black Oklahomans were being brutalized by southern law, the Canadian government was taking out full-page ads in southern newspapers, offering 160 acres of land in its unsettled western provinces to anyone who could produce the filing fee of ten dollars.

To the almost unanimously Christian Blacks, the juxtaposition of these two events seemed to be much more than coincidence. Many of them began to believe that the "Promised Land" for which they had been searching throughout their lives lay to the North—a country about which most of them knew nothing except that it had sheltered weary slave travellers at the end of their journey on the underground railroad.

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SOME RESIDUAL INNOCENCE, or naïveté from my childhood, allowed me to achieve adulthood with my belief in Canada as a non-racist society intact. I had experienced racism of the individual variety, but I trusted that my country's history was unblemished by sweeping, legislated bigotry.

Only when curiosity about my family's place in the Canadian demography prompted me to read about the reception of Blacks into Canada, only after I dissected my own family's oral histories, did I recognize my error.

Canada has frequently practised discrimination based on color and race, and every recognizable minority that lives here today has felt it.

The prospect of "too many" brown, black or yellow people making their home in Canada has, in the past, filled many White Canadians with fear, and in some cases, loathing. The same is true today.

When my great-grandfather crossed the forty-ninth parallel, he believed, in the way that many Black people of his time drew Biblical analogies to their own lives, that he was a kind of Moses, leading his family to the promised land. He had heard the Canadian winters could be harsh, but, having nothing in his past to teach him the meaning of the word "harsh," he was unprepared. He was also unprepared for Canadian racism. He learned that Canada's message of welcome had not been intended for him, or others like him.

We, the undersigned residents of the city of Edmonton, respectfully urge upon your attention and upon that of the government of which you are the

> *head, the serious menace to the future welfare of a large portion of Western Canada, by reason of the alarming influx of Negro settlers. This influx commenced about four years ago in a very small way, only four or five families coming in the first season, followed by thirty or forty families the next year. Last year several hundred Negroes arrived in Edmonton and settled in surrounding territory. Already this season nearly three hundred have arrived; and the statement is made, both by these arrivals and by the press dispatches, that these are but the advance guard of hosts to follow. We submit that the advent of such Negroes as are now here was most unfortunate for the country, and that further arrivals in large numbers would be disastrous. We cannot allow as any factors the argument that these people may be good farmers or good citizens. It is a matter of common knowledge that it has been proved in the United States that Negroes and Whites cannot live in proximity without the occurrence of revolting lawlessness and the development of bitter race hatred, and that the most serious question facing the United States today is the Negro problem…There is not reason to believe that we have here a higher order of civilization, or that the introduction of a Negro problem here would have different results. We therefore respectfully urge that such steps immediately be taken by the government of Canada as will prevent any further immigration of Negroes into Western Canada.*

This petition, issued by the Edmonton Board of Trade and supported by the signatures of 3,000 Edmontonians, was typical of reactions to Black immigration into Calgary, Winnipeg and Saskatoon. Also typical were threats of violence (which, true to gentle Canadian nature, were mostly not acted upon) and newspaper editorials carrying headlines like, "DARK INVASION" and "NO DARK SPOTS IN ALBERTA."

Canada's Liberal government, whose intent in advertising for pioneers throughout America had not been to attract Black farmers, faced the wrath of Canadian citizens and the Conservative opposition in the House of Commons. One such Conservative member is known to have stood one day to enquire whether it would not be wiser to "…preserve for the sons of Canada the lands they propose to give to niggers."

The dilemma of the government was this: how to squelch the flow of Blacks into Western Canada without interfering with the campaign to attract White farmers?

Attempts to censor inquiries from American farmers that arrived through the mail were pointless, as no envelope gave any clue to the color of its sender. Endeavours to find Blacks unfit to enter the country were ineffective also. Most of the Blacks that possessed the courage to migrate to an unknown land were also in excellent physical and financial condition. Bribing the border doctors was futile, as too few of them were willing to accept money to falsify records.

The solution that worked in the end was simple. The Canadian government hired a few Black men to travel throughout the American Southwest, to warn Black churches and organizations about the horrors of life in Canada. These paid men convinced thousands of Black people that Canada was barren and frigid, and offered them no better opportunities than what they already had.

Black immigration into Western Canada slowed, then trickled, then stopped in 1912, four years after it had begun with its "four or five families coming in the first season."

For the approximately two thousand Blacks who had already settled in Alberta and Saskatchewan, these developments were disappointing. Their numbers would remain small. It had been their hope to build an independent community that existed peacefully alongside its neighbours. They now believed that it would be a struggle for their community just to survive, let alone to be an example of Black success and racial harmony to the rest of the world.

Worse than this was the unsettling awareness that their welcome to Canada was not what they had expected, that their quest for a racial nirvana had been naïve.

There were two benefits that my great-grandfather and his peers reaped from their lack of large numbers in Canada. One was a network of closeness and support for one another. The other was that the Ku Klux Klan seemed to be unaware of their presence.

When the original furor over their arrival had subsided, the prairies' Black settlers analyzed their circumstances and most of them concluded

that they had done the best thing for themselves and their families. Canada offered Blacks the right to vote, unsegregated education for their children and a relatively peaceful existence alongside their White neighbours, whose attitudes ranged from sullen tolerance to unfettered acceptance. Their lives were unmarred by lynchings and cross burnings.

NOTE

1. Cheryl Foggo, *Pourin' Down Rain* (Calgary, AB: Detselig Enterprises, 1990), 4–10, 51–53, 105–107, 109–112.