

LENA (League of Utah Writers, 2009, writers' contest place winner)

Even considering the 1950's, when I grew up, my parents would have been viewed as prejudiced--they were not what you'd call tolerant people. These were some of their biases: having less education than they, breaking the word of wisdom, not using correct grammar, not being a good reader and therefore not smart, showing emotion or affection, not being Mormon, looking or acting "sexy," and being anything other than Caucasian.

Daddy was the principal of Roosevelt Elementary, our little town's only elementary school. My mother was a teacher there. We had two classes for each grade, and I remember my parents carefully selecting which of two teachers they wanted for me. Daddy carefully stacked my class with children from families of which they approved. Although they had to make the classes look equal, I remember they discussed the parent's vocations, their reputations, religion, and especially the student's I.Q. which was considered a definitive predictor of student success at that time. It means next to nothing now.

The Uintah Basin, out in eastern Utah where I was raised, is comprised of two counties, Duchesne and Uintah. Roosevelt sits inside the county line for Duchesne County and Vernal is thirty miles away, over the Uintah county line. Between Roosevelt and Vernal, practically on the Uintah County border, lies the Ute Indian reservation.

The people of both towns hated Indians. I remember my mother having a book on the different tribes and she showed me where it said that the Utes were the most uncivilized and lazy of all tribes. Rather than go out and hunt food, the tribe's elders would eat the family dog.

Neither county wanted Indian students going to school with white students, so the Uintah county school district built schools for them right on the reservation. Technically they were public schools, but nearly all the students were Indian.

Only occasionally did Indians live in the Roosevelt Township, therefore, Daddy had to deal with them only in a minimal way. He made certain that none were ever in my classes. So I never knew an Indian until I entered junior high school where there was a handful. The numbers increased somewhat when the Mormon Church implemented the Indian Placement program in 1954.

The placement program was designed to offer improved educational and economic opportunities to Indian students (Lamanites), who were church members at least ten years of age. In addition to proselytizing, Mormon missionaries were used to recruit qualifying families, those who lived long distances from schools or those that didn't have the economic means to meet their child's needs.

I had a few placement students in my junior high classes, but not many because of racial prejudice. It was a commonly held idea in our town that Indians could not be educated; they simply couldn't learn. I remember Mama and Daddy being highly critical of the program, saying things like, "An Indian is an Indian, no matter which tribe claims him and mixing him with our

kids can only mean trouble. Pretty soon he'll want to date white girls and who knows what will happen then!"

It was August, the summer of 1955, and we kids were anxiously awaiting UBIC, the Uintah Basin Industrial Convention. This was a three day celebration, full of all kinds of events. I entered the art show each year. There was a baby contest, beauty contest, pet show, fireworks, talent show, a dance, flower show, baking contest, outdoor concert and a movie. The celebration was an annual event held in the city park, right across the street from my church.

The first day, Thursday, I entered our family dog, Bubbles, in the pet show. She was a little Mexican Chihuahua. When the judges asked what she could do, I told them that she liked to chew bubble gum and that's how she got her name. I don't think they were overly impressed because she didn't win, but I didn't care because she was my dog and the best of the bunch.

As I was leaving for home, I spotted Lena, a placement student from my eighth grade class. She shyly approached me and asked if she could walk home with me and use the telephone to call her foster mother to come get her. Lena said she wanted to go home to get ready for the evening activities.

Lena was beautiful—tall and slender with waist long shiny black hair and large dark eyes. She said her family had a German Shepherd named Andy. So we talked about our dogs, our siblings, our interests and hobbies.

Lena loved to do bead work and draw scenery from around her home in Shiprock, New Mexico. I told her about my pastel drawing in the art show and we went to look at it. We were both excited to see that it won a blue ribbon and was selected to go on to the state art exhibit.

Lena and I found that we had a great deal in common. We decided to walk home slowly in order to get to know each other better. I told her I played the piano and she said she played a native flute. We planned to get together to work out a couple of pieces for the school talent assembly in the fall.

"I am so happy. I didn't make many friends here in the eighth grade and now I will be starting ninth grade with my best friend," she said, grabbing my hand. "I've been terribly homesick, but now I think that the placement program was maybe a good decision."

"We will be best friends, Lena," I assured her. "Let's be sure to register for our classes together, especially our art class. Maybe we can work on some projects together."

All too soon we were home. While Lena called her foster mother, I hurriedly picked up my bedroom so I could show my things to Lena. She began browsing through some of my books.

"I have never seen so many books, except in a library. I like to read and am getting better at it, but I don't know any of these books." I tried to find one she would enjoy, and then I ran onto "Gone with the Wind."

“You will surely like this one, Lena. It’s a great love story and you can borrow it.” Lena smiled and thanked me. She was so beautiful and gracious I couldn’t help staring at her. Daddy once told me that if I were a man, I’d be beaten up because of the way I stared at people.

Next I showed her some family pictures of our vacations. Mama was in her bedroom reading. That meant that I didn’t have to introduce Lena or explain her presence. Daddy was working as usual.

Five minutes later, to my dismay and horror, I heard Daddy coming in the front door. ‘Oh no! What will I do? I cannot get Lena out in time. He’s never home during the day. Why did he have to come home now? Please God, don’t let him hear us.’

As I searched for a reason to tell Lena to just whisper, she saw a family portrait on my dresser and broke in peals of laughter. “You look like you’re posing for the camera.” All my childhood pictures looked staged because I was trying to hold in my stomach, in order to look thinner--a problem Lena would never have.

My heart pounded as I heard him come down the hall toward my bedroom. Maybe he is going into Mama’s bedroom—but no, he had heard Lena laughing. Without even knocking Daddy opened the door.

He stared at Lena in disbelief, speechless for a moment. Then his face turned bright red with anger.

“Daddy, this is Lena,” I stammered. Lena stretched out her hand in greeting, but Daddy ignored her and glared at me. Then he exploded, “Get that Goddamn Indian out of here—now!”

I have a hard time remembering what happened next. Time stopped. I believe that Lena set “Gone with the Wind” down on my bed and started walking toward the front door. I followed her out on the lawn to wait for her ride. She wouldn’t look at me and neither of us spoke. What could I say?

It was just minutes before Sister Swenson came, but it seemed like an eternity. As Lena got into the car, I saw that she was crying.

That evening at UBIC there was a talent show with a dance immediately following. I didn’t go to either, yet I was at the park well before time. There I saw Marie, a wild girl from my school. She was smoking with a group of Indian boys from the reservation school. I said hello to her and then abruptly turned to one of the boys, a stranger to me. I told him I was sixteen... and ready for fun.

My comment registered with him and he gave me a questioning look. Without a word I led him across the street to my church. That night, in the shadows beneath my Sunday school classroom, I let him do things to me that I’d never even thought of.

I hate you, Daddy and you too, God. I’ll give you Indian! Look at me, at what I’m doing beneath your church window.