

Rebecca Melson

## Cultivating Nations

As I headed out to the Tuscarora Nation, on a grand mission to interview Chief Leon Locklear, I would like to say that I didn't know what I was looking for, and the cliché of finding something amazing could predictably bleed through what I was going to write. But, I knew exactly what I wanted. I wanted to see nostalgia. I wanted the people of the Nation to welcome me, and smudge me with sage. I wanted us to convene in some sort of ritual that revealed the grand future of America. I wanted a stereotype. I wanted a place that was separate from the world I know, and everything that is generic and cruel. That is not what I got as I entered the Tuscarora Nation, in Robeson County, North Carolina.

I drove on the long and sandy road that lead to the Nation, feeling mild anxiety about going down there by myself. But, I had met these people before, and they knew my family. I have the Aunts with the pretty, light faces that talk too loud, and I have the Uncles that carried alcohol in their coffee mugs. I dance. They know me.

Chief Leon and my grandmother Jessie Lee Locklear were first cousins, but my family did not meet any of these relatives until her grandchildren were all adults. When My grandmother was growing up, Native Americans did not have advantages that whites had. They were segregated from restaurants and establishments, they were taken advantage of from crop owners, and they were not viewed as equals in society. Savages. There was little nostalgia, or opportunity, for America's natives. In fact, what many Americans do not realize, is that when Martin Luther King Jr. fought for equality in America, he opened closed doors for the Natives as well. Their voice is sometimes only a whisper.

My grandmother had preferred that her children grew up with a chance, so she married the meanest white man she met, my grandfather Alford Melson. Grandma Jessy was his second wife. He already had a wife that he was forced to leave in Oregon, along with six other children. Alford Melson beat my grandmother with an anger that was not naturally of this world. He beat his children until he was too tired to beat them anymore. His children had to fight off his legacy from becoming their own for decades. Generations of us would know his legacy; always drowning a winged rage, clawing at us from our own calm selves.

## XX

I was shocked to find that cages upon cages of roosters now took up residence with the Nation. This was new to me. On the left side of the road, mildly hidden behind some tall grasses, they crowed at me through the open windows of my passing car. These majestic birds were not here several years earlier when I was, but now it seemed there were at least 70 of them, each in their individual cages, nobly awaiting their fate.

I did not remember our Chief, Leon Locklear, as a man who caged such beasts. I remember him welcoming us, and orchestrating powwow's. But Leon was getting old now, and a new generation was making the decisions for the Nation. In fact, there had been many changes since I had visited the Nation last. A small makeshift production of a factory farm was off to the other side of the property as well, where all of their submissive hens were kept in wire cages. The tribe's nostalgia was fading into the practices of the world.

Leon built the Tuscarora Nation. As I pulled into his parking lot alongside his house, he welcomed me with grace and curiosity. His frame was showing wear, as time does to us all, and I wondered if his vision was still strong with all the residents in the Nation. Do they carry on his gentle and determined spirit that I know? As I saw his dark eyes, I wondered.

He is of Tuscarora decent, and he has surrounded himself with what he believes is a right of his people. Over his lifetime, he continued to buy land in the sandy back woods areas of Robeson county. Many trailers occupy, and within them are what Leon thought would be important structures for his declared

Tuscarora Nation. There is a Tuscarora library, the Tuscarora office, and a round-house style museum dedicated to local Native American artifacts and Leon's life as a young traveling musician. Scattered about are also the planted trailers belonging to any Tuscarora who wanted a plot. Some are nicer than others, and all get to be a part of the community.

At the very heart of the Nation is a huge, low fenced circle arena for the sacred dances. The supernatural religion of the clans. I have seen hoop dances there, grass dances, and I even took my oldest daughter around in a circle dance for the children when she was very little. This is sacred land for me, this place and what I believed it held. What it does hold. Now I wonder if that ring is used for the beautiful Roosters that waited in cages, offering a blood sacrifice for our degenerate souls.

XXX

Chief Leon didn't say the things I had wanted him to. I really like interviewing people, and excavating what I feel needs to be extracted from their mouths. I have done this before, by framing my questions, and courting them with conversation. As I followed Chief Leon around the Nation, and sat with him in his trailer, he did not tell me the things that I thought he would.

"What would you say to Americans if you had a voice to reach them?" I asked, expecting to hear the story of my very own heart. Something like "we are destroying the earth, our medicines are in this land, and we need to connect with it again." Stuff like that.

"Well, I would tell thum that we did not crucify their God. I been told all my life, that I was a goin to hell. But, the white man crucified their own God. Let me ask you", he said, leaning up in his chair, "where do you think we went when we died before the white man come here?"

I didn't really know.

"We went to what we called the happy hunting grounds."

Chief Leon continued to answer my questions with the acknowledgement that the Indians did not crucify Christ, and that they should be allowed to practice their own religion, because that was what God had intended them to do. I told him of my own supernatural experiences with Christianity, and that there

was still a true path regardless of what *men* do throughout history. He nodded and agreed with me, but it was unclear where he really stood.

XXXX

Chief Leon showed me his bus. Yes, he had a bus, and he painted it with Native American scenes. There were rivers, and animals and the Tuscarora shield. He took me inside of it, and I got to see where he had turned it into a fully functioning RV. There was a spacious room in the back, a shower and bathroom. A small kitchen with a sink. I imagined him and his old finger-picking band traveling down to Florida and playing shows, moving from place to place and flying down the highway at 80 mph. Indian braids and everglades. Chief said he would sell it to me for \$11,000, and I said I would consider it.

He built many of the structures, like the longhouse and the inside of this bus, with his own hands. He used his natural understanding to create the things that he felt were necessary, like the passing down of ancient blood.

Chief told me several times that he could not read or write. I would start talking about American politics and the global gravity that everyone (mainly myself) was experiencing, and he would look apologetic. I felt that maybe my language was making him feel as though I was judging him. He must not have realized that I didn't care how he talked, or what he did or didn't learn in school. He knew things that most Americans don't, and that is how to build a nation. He must not have realized that I needed to know myself.

"In those days, we dint have time for a schoolin. It was too much work to be done. But it dint bother me. My mother had nineteen heads of youngen when I was commin up." he said with quiet gravity. Then I asked him if he would play a song for me. He had taught himself how to play music when his soul was young. On the half-banjo-half-guitar that was hand-made as well, Chief played me *Amazing Grace*.

Chief Leon had seen American time pass. He knew what the country thought of Natives as his family struggled to make ends meet. But, Leon always knew what he had wanted. He wanted his culture back, an existence without the confines of the world that had tried to erase him, suppressing his people into division

and ignorance. Chief Leon Locklear has spent his life looking for his America, soldiering for recognition and rights while illiterate, yet knowing, and building the Tuscarora Nation.

All the roosters crowed at me as I drove away.