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Indians Once Roamed This Land...

Mwalim

(Morgan James Peters)

June 1989

We are here from the Wampanoag community, and as members of this community to stand with our brothers and sisters facing the loss of a valuable resource.

The sun sat high in the cloudless, early summer sky. Jerry held his breath as Ryan punched the gas, jumping onto Route 3 a few feet ahead of an oncoming tractor-trailer. Ryan laughed as the angry truck driver blasted his air horn at them as the '79 Aspen rocketed up the highway. The ramp onto Route 3 didn't leave much room for traffic to merge; leaving the brave to shoot out onto the highway and the timid to sit and wait for an opening, often to the angry blaring of horns behind them, pushing them to jump onto the highway. Tommy, Reg, and Avery were in the back seat, laughing along with Ryan... well, at least Reg was.

The quintet of young men were still dressed in their skins from work; their civilian clothes in the trunk, tucked around the subwoofer, with Eric B. & Rakim's "The R" booming. It was the booming of the kick drum and bass line that caught the attention of the cop planted on the side of the road who decided to follow them, trying to spot any minor violation that would give him a reason to pull them over. He had followed them onto the highway, and then shot past them to the next exit once they were way beyond his jurisdiction. The carload of cousins waved at him with broad smiles as he glared back.

The home-done black paint job on the car's body glowed brightly in the afternoon sun. Ryan had purchased the car three years

earlier with some money he had saved from his summer landscaping job, and over time put more money into fixing it up, which included having one of the best car stereo systems in Mashpee. Every time Ryan pulled up in the yard, his mother would tease, “That’s a great stereo... One day you’ll get a car to go with it.” Jerry had helped him paint the car. It was a sunny day and they took it out to Big Bog, covered the windows with newspaper and painter’s tape, and sprayed it down with two coats of primer and three coats of glossy black. A couple of weeks after it dried, Ryan got his cousin Dana to buff and wax it for him.

...We are here from the Wampanoag community, and as members of this community to stand with our brothers and sisters facing the loss of a valuable resource. A resource that is being taken from them the same way it was taken from our ancestors many years ago...

It was the start of summer time, and everybody’s hair but Reg’s was cut close because they were working at the Plimouth Plantation for the summer. Not just because Wampanoags wore their hair short, but also to cover up the fact that they all, except for Reg, had curly to kinky hair, which would kill the preconceived illusion for the visitors and tourists. Tommy loved going to Boston and was lobbying for the group to make a stop downtown to some of the clothing stores. Reg was glad to finally be old enough to make a road trip with his older cousins. Avery had gotten a phone number from this girl at the teen night at the Mill Hill Club and was looking to connect with her.

Jerry loved spending his summers in Mashpee. The day after the last day of school, he’d be in the St. James Avenue station to catch the P & B bus down to Sagamore, where his grandpa would pick him up. Every few weeks, his parents would come down on the weekends and his mother and grandmother would go shopping in Hyannis at the mall, or they would all go to Mashpee/Wakeby Pond or South Cape/Jonas Beach.

This was the first summer he wasn’t going to be bagging groceries or working a cash register at Purity Supreme, washing pots at the Flume, or landscaping with his uncle. Instead, each morning Ryan would round up the crew, and they would head to the Plimouth Plantation, working as “cultural interpreters” for the Wampanoag exhibit. Everybody kicked in five bucks a week toward gas and brought a good tape for the stereo.



Black and Red

A member of the Mashpee Wampanoag, dressed in his “skins,” stomps a traditional dance at the Native American tribe’s annual powwow on Cape Cod in 2009. Like many other tribes on the Eastern Seaboard, much of the Mashpee’s membership reflects an intermixture of African American and native peoples. Photo by Juan Carlos Santoro. Reprinted by permission.

The group knocked off from work a couple of hours early to attend the rally in Grove Hall. It seemed that the BRA was up to its usual business of redeveloping Boston by taking folks' property out from under them in the name of urban renewal and development. Jerry had been working with one of the community groups housed on Blue Hill Avenue, right across from where Warren Street ended. It was a project that was being supported by the Quakers to promote youth leadership and youth empowerment. Ironically, when the group wanted to break away from the Quakers, they were met with resistance. This was part of their protest as well. On one hand, you have the city trying to take private property from people and, on the other hand, you have the same people fighting for their independence from those who are supposed to be about peace and freedom.

Week before last, Jerry had gotten back to his grandmother's and found that his mom had left a message for him to get in touch with Alex, the leader of the community group. Alex answered the phone. He always spoke rapidly and urgently. His saying something as simple as, "I'm going to grab a slice and a juice," sounded like the most important thing to happen at the moment, often leaving a small party of volunteers to go with him, as if being struck by a sudden craving for pizza.

"Jerry, glad you called. Hey, listen, they're trying to take us down, young blood."

"What's up?"

"The Boston Redevelopment Authority is at it again. But now the target is us. They're coming after the office."

"But you own the office, right?"

"This is the thing, I own the building, apparently not the ground under it. They want to take us down and put up a shopping plaza."

"Wow."

"Yeah, but check this: We want this to have a full representation of the community. You know what I'm saying? I know you're part of the native folks... you're people are from Mashpee, right?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Perfect, perfect, perfect... That's it... Rodney was trying to get Mister Peters from the commission, but he wasn't available, plus I figured we have somebody right in the crew, so check this..." The idea was that Jerry would speak about the destruction of the community

from the Wampanoag perspective and, as an added visual, he would do this in his regalia with his similarly dressed cousins behind him. “Man, that’ll blow the press’ mind!” said Alex. “The original people of the area standing up for the community. Yeah, man!”

As they whirled past the exits for Hingham, Jerry looked at his notes and mentally practiced his speech, trying to shut out the conversations going on around him. “Man, they better have some place for us to change our clothes. I’m not walking around the ’hood dressed like this,” Ryan said, laughing. “Alex said we could change in the office after the rally. If not, we can change at my house,” replied Jerry, still trying to focus on his notes. A lot of research went into these notes. He asked Nanepashemet, the historian at the plantation, about Grove Hall and the Wampanoag presence. Nany (as he was called) was always good for an answer and for directing folks to a book or document when he was hit with such questions, which was rather often. Jerry made a number of calls to the nice ladies working the reference desk at the Boston Athenaeum and stitched the rest together with his poetic imagination.

He found out that Grove Hall began as a crossroads for folks who wanted to leave the city of Boston and later became the site of mansions and estates belonging to people who wanted to live outside of the city. A Kilby Jones built an estate on the Roxbury side of the area, and Marshall Wilder, who was president of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society in the 1800s, built his estate on the Dorchester side, with his house and greenhouses on the corner where there is now a Burger King and discount store. Growing up near there, he remembered seeing blackberry bushes and pear trees in some of the vacant lots near there:

... Now that it is a place where wonderful things can grow, they want to take it away from the people. We, the Wampanoag of this community cannot let that happen again. We stand with you!

Ryan, Tommy, and Reg applauded the speech when Jerry finally read it to them. Avery did too, but he felt it didn’t sound Indian enough. “You know how folks are, cuz. Think about the stupid questions and comments we get all day from visitors,” Avery said between drags on his cigarette. “These folks are gonna want you to ‘speakum Indian’... You know... *Long time ago, my people roam this land... long*

before white man come... the woods were plentiful with deer and much hunting for our people was done...” They laughed, and Avery continued, “Seriously, cuz, that’s a good speech.”

The car got off of the expressway at Exit 11, rolled up Gallivan Boulevard, and across Washington Street. Jerry cautioned Ryan to shut off the car stereo so that nobody would know that he had a kicker in the trunk. Car break-ins were very common. He also pulled the stereo out of the unit and stuck it under the seat. After they turned up Columbia Road and rode along Blue Hill, Ryan pulled the car into a parking space next to a small grocery store. They could see and hear the crowd up the street and the distorted loudspeaker. The police had put up those blue, wooden barriers to protect the protesters and their homemade signs from on-coming traffic. There had to be a couple of hundred people there. Some were protesters, some were curious passersby, and a few newspaper reporters and cameramen were there, too. One young, college-looking white guy with a pad was interviewing people on the fringe of the crowd.

The group had built a makeshift platform in front of the office, on which Alex and several other community leaders and organizers stood as speakers took turns at the microphone. Alex spotted Jerry and his crew as they strolled up Blue Hill Avenue to the stares and whispered comments of passersby, and a few admiring glances from the ladies. Alex waved to them as he jumped from the podium, cut through the crowd, and greeted them near a police barrier. He embraced Jerry with a big smile and was introduced to the others. “I’m so glad you brothers could make it. This is good. This is unity.” He escorted them up to the podium along with a couple of his volunteer security guards. Before they got up on the platform, Alex turned and said, “Okay, here we go. We had to make one change. I don’t know if you’ll get to speak or not, but I’m going to make sure the crowd knows you all are here.” “Is there anybody in the crowd who didn’t see us?” mused Tommy out loud. “Hold up, you asked me to speak and had me bring my folks in regalia. Now you tell me I might not get a chance?” Jerry said, with his discontent echoed by Avery, Tommy, Reg, and Ryan. “Let’s bounce out and hit the shops downtown,” Tommy interjected. As far as he was concerned, Oaktree and Tello’s were the real reasons to come to town.

“No, no, no, brothers. We need you here. We need your presence and what you represent. It’s just that Dr. Ted feels that we need a Wampanoag leader as a speaker.”

“What?” said Ryan.

“Well, you know, they were trying to get Slow Turtle, and I guess I jumped the gun by asking you.”

“It’s your group and your building, right? Who the hell is Ted?” Ryan retorted.

“He’s one of the main organizers of the rally and on the board for my group.”

“We all took off from work to be here and hear our cousin speak.”

“Man, this is bullshit, they’re just trying to treat us like the white folks do. We’re just an exhibit,” Avery complained.

“No-no-no, it’s not like that, brothers...”

“That’s exactly what it’s like,” Reg insisted.

“He just feels we need a representation of the community...”

“Slow Turtle doesn’t live in this community. Our cousin does. Lots of our cousins do. There gotta be a few hundred Mashpees living in Roxbury, Mattapan, and Dorchester,” Ryan said.

“Young bloods, understand, you are making quite the statement by just being here.”

“And we’re about to make quite the statement by leaving,” Avery replied as he started to walk off, followed by the others.

“Maybe we can just stand here and hold cigars,” Ryan joked with a laugh.

Just as Alex was trying to get them to come back, the young reporter appeared and began to ask Avery questions about his group, their outfits, and why they came to the rally. Just as Avery and Ryan were about to tell the reporter the story, Alex popped up and interrupted, putting his hand on Jerry’s shoulder. “This young brother is a Mashpee Wampanoag, a member of the community as well as my organization, and is one of our speakers for the rally.” The quintet looked at Alex as the reporter directed his attention and questions to Jerry. Then his photographer took a picture of the quintet with Alex and a guy from the Nation of Islam.

As other reporters came to interview the guys, Alex went over to the platform and spoke to a rather uptight looking man in a dashiki

shirt and an Afro that looked like it hadn't been picked since the 70s. Dr. Ted's posture was at first dismissive when Alex pointed to the guys, until he also pointed to the members of the press interviewing them. Dr. Ted made some marks on a clipboard and passed it to one of the other men on the platform, then came down and strolled over with a phony smile plastered on his face. He went to embrace Avery until Alex directed him toward Jerry. Dr. Ted's approach was strategically timed... either that or the obvious photo opportunity of three news photographers being there to get a picture of Dr. Ted embracing and posing with Jerry was pure serendipity. As the reporters asked Jerry questions about his involvement with the rally and his perspective, Dr. Ted dominated the interview, answering for Jerry: "These young brothers are from the Wampanoag community, and this young man in particular is a part of our organization. He is a fine and dynamic leader in training. They are here to show the extent of diversity and unity within the community that we serve and are a part of." Dr. Ted did let them answer the questions about their names, ages, and where they were from.

Finally, after a speech by two women, one in English and the other in Spanish, Alex came forward to introduce Jerry and the other guys. The four cousins stood behind Jerry as he went up to the microphone, cleared his throat, greeted the audience, and made his speech:

We are here from the Wampanoag community, and as members of this community to stand with our brothers and sisters facing the loss of a valuable resource. A resource that is being taken from them the same way it was taken from our ancestors many years ago. Change has been a part of this area for many, many years, but these changes have not always been good...to our ancestors. This was said to be a land of plenty. A place where wild fruits and edible plants grew. Rivers and brooks that have long since been rerouted and rechanneled met and parted on these lands. When the land was lost to our ancestors, it soon became the estates of the Sumners, Joneses, and Wilders. Wilder in particular knew the value of the land for growing all kinds of plants. This had become a place of crime, poverty, and all kinds of

social disease, and the city didn't care then. The city had no interest until it became a garden of positive minds and spirits. New things began to grow here! This became a place of empowerment, as it was meant to be in the days of my ancestors. Now that it is a place where wonderful things can grow, they want to take it away from the people. We of the Wampanoag community cannot let that happen again. We stand with you!

The speech was greeted with enthusiastic applause and whoops and hoots from the audience. For Jerry, it was the longest 45 seconds of his life. As he and his cousins were heading off of the podium, people came rushing over to talk to them and thank Jerry for what he said. Most of the people who came over shared their stories of having a Cherokee or Algonquin grandmother or grandfather, or hearing stories about a native in their ancestry and were asking Jerry and his cousins how they can find out more about their own heritage. When Jerry would explain that both of his parents were from Mashpee and on the tribal rolls, some of the folks eyed him suspiciously and asked questions about his level of native blood. Ironically, the only one among them who “looked” native was Reg, whose straight, dark brown hair, prominent nose, and cheekbones were courtesy of his Irish-Polish mother.

The group left the rally, changed their clothes, and made it downtown in time for Tommy to hit up his shops and buy a few outfits. The daily papers ran the story the next day inside the papers. One paper ran the picture of Alex, the guy from the Nation of Islam, and the five guys in their regalia with a small blurb about the rally and a long story dedicated to discussing the BRA's objectives and plans to improve dilapidated areas of the city. A few days later, a picture of Jerry, Avery, Ryan, and Tommy appeared on the cover of a community newspaper with the headline, “The Indians Want Dorchester Back!” along with smaller pictures of protesters carrying signs, Alex speaking into a bullhorn, and Dr. Ted joining hands with other leaders during a prayer. This article included a piece of Jerry's speech. Clippings of these articles were hung on the bulletin board at the plantation. Over time, the faces acquired penned-in moustaches and blackened teeth until they were replaced with the next news items to come out.

2013

Jerry and his daughter sat in his car at the stop light on Blue Hill Avenue, just before the left turn onto Warren Street. He glanced over at the entrance to the shopping plaza for Stop & Shop where Alex's building once stood, next to what had been the M&M Tavern. His mind immediately went back to the rally when he saw an elderly man waiting for a bus, wearing a Cleveland Indians baseball cap and smoking a cigar. As the light turned green, Jerry drove down Blue Hill Avenue laughing as his daughter wondered what was so funny.

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