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FLORENCE CONSTANT
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HAITI, 1963
AGE 9

NASH: June 21, 1974. I am speaking with Miss Florence Constant,
who is nineteen years old, and came to the United States from
Haiti in the year 1963. When she came she was nine years old.

CONSTANT: My name is Florence, and what I really remember about Haiti, what's
the clearest thing in my mind, is when my mother and father left Haiti and left six kids
behind. Three of us girls were living with my aunt, my so-called aunt, and my three brothers
were living with my grandmother. It was really weird because my aunt treated us like
terribly. For example, I remember a room upstairs in the attic where one of her husbands
died and no one would ever go in that room because everyone thought, you know, there was a
curse on him, and everyone was afraid of that room. It was kept dark and cold. And there
was bucket there and my aunt wanted me to get it, knowing that, you know, that we were really

frightened of that room. She sent us up there, my sister and I. We were crying every step of the way, you know, sneaked in and took the bucket and ran back out. It was the worse thing, I mean it was the most frightening day of my life, really. Things I remember about Haiti. I remember it is a nice country, but, you know, the way I lived down there was terrible. My parents wasn't there. For a long time I didn't see them. Only once a year. And I hated the people I was living with, you know.

NASH: Where did you live in Haiti?

CONSTANT: It is a little town, I don't even remember the name. I never knew the name as a matter of fact, you know. That wasn't important. Talk about eating, I was eight years old and I weighed forty-five to fifty pounds. For dinner we had little square piece of bread, you know, with water or whatever. It was really horrible. My mother sent money to her each month. She took it, you know, never fed us, never bought us clothes, whatever. She was like a witch.

NASH: Where were your parents?

CONSTANT: In New York. My father was studying Law in Haiti, and the
 best place to settle down was in New York because Haiti wasn't
 making it too much at that time with the dictatorship and everything.
 So, they accumulated enough money about two or three years
 afterwards to send for us. There were six of us, you know, so they

had to get everything together first.

NASH: How did you feel when you first found out you were going?

CONSTANT: Oh, great. Believe me, believe me. New York, it was like what most people thought when they were coming here, New York, the best place to live. You have everything. I remember when my mother was telling me about snow, the snowflakes, snow flowers she called them, and when I came in October it started snowing. Little snow flurries. I said, "Hey, where are the snow flowers you were talking about?" I thought they looked like flowers, you know, she said, "No, they are just little droplets of snow." And it was really exciting on the plane, and six of us, didn't speak a word of English. Didn't know what the food was and lucky there was a lady next to us that took care of us, ordered what we wanted, you know, acted like a mother for the time being. It was really nice coming here. Weird, we had summer dresses and it was kind of chilly at the time, you know. Oh, I felt strange when I first came here, seeing all those people, you know, you are only nine years old, you don't know anything, especially the big city. Used to living in little peasant towns. We lived in Brooklyn for the first year. I loved it, I loved it. I forgot, what was it in Bedford, Bedford Avenue. We had nice neighbors. everyone liked us because we couldn't speak English, you

know. Thought we were cute, whatever. I remember a lady asked me once, "What's your name?" and the only thing my father taught me was to say, fine, thank you, you know, how are you? Fine thank you. I said, "Fine, thank you," and everyone laughed. My brothers laughed. I was so embarrassed. Oh, I never spoke again, never. I never wanted to speak English till I spoke it perfectly. Then we went to school, you know. We picked it up pretty fast. In six months I spoke it. Everything was really exciting, the friends we had and it was really a different way of life.

NASH: What was different about it?

CONSTANT: Everything. I mean busses, subways, TV. TV, forget it. I never saw TV before. I remember we had a movie theater across the street and we went to see Sinbad the Sailor, and this other cowboy. No, no, no, cops and robber pictures. I remember one scene. A car was running away from the police and it was coming, you know, straight towards us and I screamed. I thought the car was going to come out of the screen towards us, you know. Stupid, idiot things.

NASH: Didn't you see movies in Haiti?

CONSTANT: No, no, never, never. I mean only people who was fortunate

enough, who had money, went to the movies once in a while. Everything was pretty exciting. School, I couldn't wait.

NASH: And how about your parents? How did they make out?

CONSTANT: Alright. They both had to work when we first came. And there was a lady downstairs, a super. I think that is what she was, and she took care of us. She had some kids and she taught us how to write. Not how to write, but taught us some of the English language. Oh, going back to the question you asked me before about how do I feel coming to New York. My aunt was mad because like my sister and I used to do all the chores, do everything. She took advantage of us, you know. Our parents were not here. My mother sent me a birthday card once with a dollar. A dollar was a lot. A penny was a nickel, so you know how much a dollar is worth. She took it. She said, "I'll buy you things whenever you need it." Do you think I ever saw anything? Never, never. I was always the chicken. Marie was brave, my sister. she asked us, do we want to leave. I mean can you wait to leave? Marie says, "Yes, I want to leave right away," but I says, "I want to stay. I like you so much." Lies, you know, lies. Marie hated toothpaste so she made Marie eat a whole thing of toothpaste because she couldn't wait to leave. and she treated me really nice, you know, being a chicken as I was. Oh, I

will never forget that. They used to beat up on us every night. There were six of us sleeping in the same room. Bunk beds, you know, like a prison, that type of thing. There was this lady, her daughter, she was maybe around eighteen at the time. Wazoom was her name. Oh, another witch, the whole family was witches then. She used to pinch me and Marie at nights because, you know, we would get homesickness. I mean once a year you would see your parents. And so she would pinch us, every night, beat up on us, you know, sneakingly at three o'clock in the morning we used to wake up crying, couldn't sleep. Forget it, it was horrible. Now she is in New York and I am dying to see her to curse her out, do something, revenge, you know.

NASH: Have you seen her yet?

CONSTANT: Nope, nope. She's married and has a kid and the first time I thought of that I wanted to see her kid and choke her. Oh, I am dying to get back at them, really I am dying to see them.

NASH: How about now? What difference is being--or having been born in Haiti mad in your life?

CONSTANT: What do you mean really?

NASH: Do you feel different because you were born in Haiti, from other people that you know?

CONSTANT: Yeah, well, I was raised different from, you know, the American way of life. My mother is still the Haitian type, certain beliefs, you know. She brought, for example, in Haiti if you go out with guy, the first guy you go out with you marry him. If you go out with three guys you are the biggest whore in town, you know. And you know I don't think that way over here. I bring guys over. Oh, forget it, my father, can't meet them. Shoot them dead at the sight. It is really a different way of life from the Americans. But, I don't really feel like a Haitian because I don't go away. I mean I don't go by their ways. I think they are really backwards, they are backwards. How to raise kids, you know. They shouldn't know about anything until they are married or nineteen, twenty, you know, that is when they should start knowing about sex. That's ridiculous.

NASH: Did your parents start teaching you this yet?

CONSTANT: They didn't. Really, they are still afraid to talk about it, but they know I know now, so they will whisper a word or two. They are getting alright now. Well, my mother is anyway. She is starting to understand.

NASH: Do you have any Haitian friends?

CONSTANT: A few, but I don't hang out with them because Haitians are really weird. I mean they are different from Americans, from anyone else, period, you know. Once you do something, all the rest of the Haitian click knows about it, you know. No matter what it is. Prying into your business and ridiculous little things like that so I just don't bother. I don't think the way they do.

NASH: Do you live in a neighborhood where there are a lot of Haitians?

CONSTANT: Yeah, yeah. Cambria Heights, yeah, they are all moving down in Queens now, you know. I don't know, I just don't mingle with them. I don't speak with an accent and you can always pick out a Haitian in the crowd from the way they look. And I usually hear Haitians talking about me, and I don't look like I am Haitian. And, you know, you'd come back with a remark and they would be shocked because, you know, they would find out that you are Haitian and what not.

NASH: What did they say?

CONSTANT: Ah, she is Haitian, wow. I'd say, "Right," you know.

NASH: What do they say before they know you are listening to them?

CONSTANT: Oh, well, like, I walk rather looking around and what not,
 but to them that's being conceited or, you know, I mean
 something or the other. They always have something to say about
 someone else, always. No matter what it is, they will find a fault
 whether you have it or not. It is never nice when they talk about
 you, hardly. I can't speak for everyone, but the ones I have met.

NASH: What are your plans?

CONSTANT: Well, right now I am thinking about being a bilingual secretary at
the U.N. or ground hostess. I can get the ground hostess job whenever I want because my
father works at Pan Am. But, I am not sure if that is what I really want to do right now.
But, if it comes along I will take it.

NASH: Do you think you will ever go back to Haiti, to have a look?

CONSTANT: Yeah, I'll go back. I want to go back this summer, you know, to hang
out for a while. But, the government is too rough right now. It is still too dictatorship
like, and too many things going on. I wouldn't want to live there right now. Just to visit,
visit my grandmother who is still there. My brothers they--where they lived next door was
like--they practiced voodoo and every night you would hear weird things, weird things I mean,

and you know that chant, you know what you see on TV, that's not how it is, but basically the chants, the drums beating and a lot--I didn't live there, I just heard a few heres and theres. I remember when I had to go and visit them you would walk through a cemetery for a shortcut and my aunt told me, if you walk through a cemetery alone--that's why I wouldn't go visit them, sneak off at night, you know--if you go through the cemetery alone the dead will wake up and get you. I mean, when you are young you don't know better, you know. Still today I am scared to walk through a cemetery. She used to tell me things that are so outrageous and I would believe it all, gullible as I am. There is a lot of superstition in Haiti and everything you do--they try to control your whole lifestyle, you know, they don't want you to go there they will tell you something is going to happen to you, and they are so serious you would think it was true, you know. It has an effect on a lot of kids.

NASH: Does it still have an effect on you today?

CONSTANT: I mean, the cemeteries, yeah. I don't want to go through
no cemeteries, I will tell you that much. Walking through the
beaches if you step on a shell it would pee in your eye. It would
pee in your eye. I mean it is ridiculous, but I believed that too.
Like weird stupid things like that they would tell you. Corrupt you.
They are so superstitious.

NASH: Do you think that some educated Haitians still to an extent
believe in these things?

CONSTANT: No, I don't think so. I don't think so. I mean Haitians-- I don't think they believe that anymore because the kids are more aware than they were when I was younger, you know, the adults are aware that the kids are aware, so all this nonsense stopped, it stopped.

NASH: Is there anything else that you would like to say about being an immigrant?

CONSTANT: Not, really. I don't feel like an immigrant. I feel like I have been here, I was born here. I adapted to this way of life pretty quick. I may not like it, but I feel the same as everyone else.

NASH: What don't you like?

CONSTANT: I can't really think of them right offhand now. It is expensive to live here, and really in Haiti you would find a house for the price that you pay a month for an apartment, you know, or even less.

NASH: Okay, well, thank you very much.