A Spiritual Cleansing

Life as a Black family in a predominantly White environment on an American Air Force Base (AFB) in France in 1957, is etched in my memory, and easily characterized as idyllic, peaceful and oftentimes adventurous; facilitated by a nearby expansive forest, that “military brats,” explored endlessly, especially during blissful summer school breaks. I had no idea what it was like growing up socially as a Black person in America; the French did not appear much interested in race.

I have scattered isolated memories of life in the United before arriving in France; my parents, myself and two younger brothers remained in France until 1965, a year before President De Gaulle expelled all U.S. military bases.

In the sixties Black active duty military took comfort in the relative security of military life on base, a life, ostensibly, geared to enhance national security, but ultimately for them, a haven to safety raise their children. As in the twenty-first century, racially motivated, “burning and looting,” sometimes did occurred in some American cities, however, never within the sanctum of our beloved military bases.

After returning to the United States in 1965 I read a newspaper article about Charlie Pride, a Black Country western singer who wanted to buy a house in Montana. He had wealth beyond that of most people of any color, White people, ultimately, were the source of his fame and wealth. I never met a Black person that purchased his records, undoubtedly, White people loved him! He wanted to purchase a specific home among Whites, but no amount of money could have bought him that house in “The Big Sky Country.” I read about the prevailing issues of “the Black
Experience” in America, but had no reference point, until I visit cousins in Chicago and be fascinated by the contrast of our lives. Black music captivated me, and when a young Black girl flirted with me in a neighborhood grocery store, I was never the same.

Eventually I discern that the underbelly of American society harbored a palpable, diabolically driven manifestation of hatred, particularly for Jews, but no less for Blacks, Hispanics, American Indians and all other minorities in America. To identify the source, I tuned-out the biased media; that routinely twisted the truth into proselytized political agendas; that shamelessly fanned the flames of civil unrest and portrayed blatant lawlessness as “justifiable righteous acts.” Unprecedented irresponsibility displayed by local and national political figures; that clearly lost sight of the founding precepts of United States Constitution that declared all lives matter.

April 4, 1968 Dr Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated, Black Civil Rights activists throughout America were grief-stricken; instinctively, I knew it would have a colossal impact on the future of the Civil Rights Movement. Fifty-three days before my graduation from Charles M. Russell High School (CMR), Great falls Mt., on April 5, minutes before the ringing of the first bell, my girlfriend, Denise Mincy and I stood casually talking between two parallel lengths of grayish-silver metallic lockers, brightly illuminated by evenly-space rows of overhanging, rectangular-shaped fluorescent lights. I held both of our books as we stood on a well-polished pristine marbled floor.

Two years previously, I had been one of two Black male students, no Black females, until Denise, a junior, the beautiful daughter of a Black Air Force Captain (Black officers we’re almost unheard of) and a hand-full of other high school-age Black children were enrolled at CMR. Before their arrival, my sophomore year, I often sat isolated in Political Science class while the students
formed groups at the instructor’s prompting. No one ever offered me to join, and I cannot ever remember the teacher ever speaking to me or even glancing in my direction, but I eyed him intensely and suspiciously, especially when he broached the subjects of the Klu Klux Klan or the John Birch Society. From the time I entered school each morning until the bell rang at three each evening, I was always conscious of my environment, every moment.

Denise and I casually spoked that day, being painfully aware of my father’s imminent departure for Vietnam, and myself to another state, following graduation. I did not know it then, but I would never see her again; then without warning our lives soon took a momentous turn. Approached by three white male students (I immediately recognize the speaker; a popular wrestler on the school team) says, “What you Niggers going to do now that Martin Luther King is dead?” He said it quite matter-of-factly; stunned, I slowly pivot toward Denise, no time to think, momentarily glimpsing the melancholic expression in her eyes, prompting me to gently hand over our books, then turn to face him. Our bodies collide instantaneously, no punches thrown, frenzied horizontal movements, crashing to and fro into adjacent lockers until some outside force separates our locked embrace. It was over that quick, I am terrified of the potential consequences, have I just ruined my chances to graduate? I tried to appease him by suggesting we tell the principal we were just “horse playing,” he did not respond or look in my direction. I felt intensely at that moment that he did not consider me human, oddly, I could not “wrap my head around that.”

A revelation of an unspoken truth had unfolded for me that day, reinforced four years later, when a track and field event I was scheduled to watch at the 1972 Olympics in Munich was canceled because of the murder of 11 Jewish Israeli athletes and their coaches, by a Palestinian
terrorist group called “Black September.” I had heard of Black September from 11th Signal company dispatches, warning our “isolated radio site,” of actual and potential attacks on sites scattered over Germany, including a NATO radio site. I remember one night being on alert, locking and loading my M-16 (something we never did) laying prone on cold compound gravel, concerned by unidentified automotive lights trained on our front gate.

I had no idea Muslins hated Jews, or why; feelings conjured in me from the virulent murders of the Jews in Munich, awakened memories of my “high school scuffle.” I felt the presence of that dark, diabolical spirit manifest around me as I had four years earlier at CMR. I knew now that not only was race and religion “bones of contention,” on an international stage, but would be instrumental in dictating the future of our human existence.

I cannot tell you how my “high school scuffle,” affected my family, because after hearing it, no one ever spoke about it again. I shared that story with my MBA class in 2000, 32 years later, not planned, but a 15-minute impromptu speech, that poured out of mouth effortlessly. After I lost track of time, my Major professor signaled me from the rear of the classroom.

I have never shared the story again since that day twenty years ago in Graduate School, until now. I never cried as a 17 year old boy, or after sharing it in 2000, but, fifty-two years later I silently weep in front of my computer screen as I hear my story resurrected, as I listen to the “first draft,” of this essay being read in my “Virtual Creative Writing Class.”