The Grass Is Always Greener, In My Head

By

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There’s a place where the locals gather away from the crowds of tourists who prefer the neon lights on the other side of town. It’s a park that covers an entire square block of the city and is enclosed by a black, rod-iron fence with fleur-de-lis finials pointing to the sky. As you walk through the oversized, ornamental gates that squeak loudly from decades of wear going back two millennia, there are several robust Oak trees, just as old and withering. With their rotund trunks and branches dripping down so low they can kiss the ground, the trees provide necessary shade yet still not enough to bring the temperature down to a reasonable level.

I remember the park fondly and am often brought back there with a simple reminder – from the sound of lively, street-filled music or the sight of the vibrant colors of Mardi Gras; to the smell of spices that linger long after your meal is over. Decades have flown by since I left New Orleans and I often wonder if these memories are accurate or if my youthful optimism kept things greener than reality.

Mercy’s sitting on a bench under one of the trees still in her house dress and fanning herself as if pushing the hot air around would make any sort of difference in the stifling heat. Her legs spread where they naturally would rest from being such a large woman, causing her dress to hike up just enough to leave nothing to question. And her size leaves only enough room for one, if she’s in the mood to move over. But given her size, the heat, and her mood, I doubt she has the energy for any hospitality.

My mom is a former New York City model and always dresses nicely with her hair done in whatever modern style is the rage. She looks as if she just stepped right off the cover of a
fashion magazine and with everything she did, she made it look so effortless. The band huddles over in the corner of the park to rehearse for their next Second Line. Exhausted from the heat and dripping of sweat, they play their brass horns with such diminished energy every song drags on like a funeral dirge. But when they see my mom coming closer, they suddenly play just a bit louder with so much more exuberance even the birds take notice and turn their way. Giving it their all to get my mom’s attention, the band’s new sound matches the zest for life in my mom. This is where I learned to flirt. Where a flash of a smile and a dash of humor created a space for others to feel alive.

My mom loves the music and sashays by the band, arms in the air, with a radiant smile so big and bright it’s contagious. She sings along in her beautiful French accent and just slightly off-key, which makes her existence all the more endearing. With the focus on my mom, everyone forgets about the heat; even if it is only temporary. My mom walks by me and my sister to ask if we’re okay; only stopping long enough to hear our positive responses as her focus is on talking with Mercy about our next crawfish boil.

Crawfish boils are big around here and happen rain or shine. You can invite 20 people and 50 will show, which is fine because everything is cooked in large enough amounts you could feed an Army. Each vat holds its own delicacy simmering inside over a fire that cooks all day long. They’re fiercely guarded by the elders so only the cook can season and nothing is served until Mercy says it’s time. Nobody leaves hungry, that’s for certain. No matter what, all are welcome because we’re just friends you haven’t me yet!

Walking across the lush carpet of grass that wilts in the humid heat, my mom makes her way over to Mercy, who begrudgingly turns her body in a gesture to provide additional room without exerting much effort. She tells Mercy with proper courtesy it’s fine and slips onto the
park bench alongside. She really doesn’t have to worry too much since she still has her figure even after two children. This is where I learned respect. Being respectful of my elders – always showing others grace and kindness regardless of age, sex, or race, no matter what society says. So, there they are, sitting on that park bench under the canopy of Oak trees, planning the details as if this get-together is more important than the last. You see, here, there is always something to celebrate and everything is celebrated.

My dad, who looks like a JFK stand-in only with blond hair, has the ability to make people laugh at the drop of a bad dad joke. His sense of humor vacillates from the corny to changing song lyrics that fit the irony of the moment. With his good looks and resonant voice, life directed him down a path of creative expression in both theatre and radio. Habitually joking he has a face for radio, this self-deprecation is merely part of his charm. Women swoon over all 5’6” of him and he eats up the attention with full enjoyment. I don’t know who eggs on the other more, but I do know the larger the group, the more jovial he becomes and this is what keeps his fan club growing.

The old station wagon with wood paneling is red and its color can only be described as that of a fine wine. My sister and I affectionately call her Rosie and our favorite spot to sit is in the very back where two seats pop up on either side. Since the tailgate and each side of the wagon has a big window, this is the best seat to enjoy a roadtrip and is far enough away from parental gaze. When not playing games or fighting with my sister, I stare out the back window at the world behind us and easily get lost in my thoughts from the monotonous, yet soothing, rhythm of the road.

Rosie is washed to a shine and ready for heading down to Plaquemines Parish for another crawfish boil. My mom is dressed in Capri pants that hug her body to show off her hourglass
figure while my sister and I wear matching dresses; hers in blue and mine in red. I’m not at all thrilled about wearing a dress and complain as much. I want to wear pants to climb trees, find lizards, and do cartwheels, but I am once again reminded of appearances as we all pile into the car.

Driving down to Mercy’s for our day-long adventure, there is an excitement in the air. My parents are laughing and happily chatting about eating a lot of delicious food; tossed in with incessant teasing of eating turtle soup – just to see my reaction. With a grateful tone, they look forward to seeing friends again. We’re lucky we can see them at all considering the level of racism and the threats we’ve endured. This drive is one of the rare times we feel free from the hatred – getting out of the white, middle-class neighborhood and deeper into the waterways protected by the thick of the trees.

It’s so sorrowful to grow up in these times of racial division and hate. If only people could see past skin color and focus on the happiness we share with others. Our commonalities are far greater than what divides us. I’m only six and I already know this. I suppose most children do until we’re slapped with the reality of experience – that pain of betrayal from adults who cause the polish on our optimistic outlook in life to fade.

After my dad turns the corner down the long, winding, dirt road that leads to Mercy’s, before you can even see the house that’s raised high off the ground, you can smell the food. Getting a little closer, you can hear the voices laughing and then you hear that music. The music that brings out the life in you and you just can’t help feel lifted. As soon as we arrive, my mom is already out of the car and dancing. My Dad laughs, swipes his hair across his face in that JFK way, and gets out of the car to join her. My sister takes off running to see her friends with my mom yelling not to go too far.
Mercy spends most of her day coming in and out of the house making her infamous delicacies for all who have gathered. Standing at the stove and with so much to do for everyone, she still has a few rollers left in her hair. That’s usually where you’ll find me – in the kitchen with Mercy or sitting on the back steps just outside the kitchen door waiting for her to ask me to help with something. Today, I’m on the back steps; my mind playfully wandering through thoughts of running as fast as I can to the nearest tree just to see how high I can climb. If not for this dreaded dress. Who wears a dress to a crawfish boil, anyway?

My daydreaming of such tomboy tasks is interrupted with Mercy yelling to everyone who passes through the kitchen, “Don’t ya dare slam that damn door again! I have a mind to slap the black off ya and stick ya in this here pot!” Then she’d mumble under her breath as though I couldn’t hear her, “Good Lord, I swear that child’s fixin’ to drive me to an early grave!” You’d think they would know by now not to slam the door, but I figure Mercy’s heart is bigger than she lets on. Everyone else likely figures that, too, so they keep slamming the door and Mercy keeps yelling threats.

Mercy sees me now, although I suspect she knew I was there all along, and calls me inside to taste test the soup. Eagerly saying yes to this idea, I quickly realize my mistake when she stirs the pot to scoop up a ladle full and I see turtles floating! It’s all I heard all morning and chalked it up to some kind of joke my parents had everyone in on and I wasn’t falling for it. I instantly withdraw myself away from the stove in repulsion. With my eyes bulging from their sockets, I shrieked out an emphatic, unedited filter, “No!” But Mercy set the bowl on the table and decisively stated as she turned back to more important things, “Child, stop fussin’ and eat.” I dutifully sit down and take a small taste only to find the warm water soothing to the lips and the spices pleasurable to the tongue. It’s so good I have to restrain myself from not looking too
ent after all the fuss I caused. Who knew turtle soup would be my new favorite food? Mercy
only made enough soup for just her family so I am humbled by the gesture and embarrassed for
my reaction. From the first sip to the last spoonful, I ate the soup proudly knowing I was
included in her family.

Then came the best part of the day; that moment when Mercy yells out the door, “Y’all
come and get it now!” The official call to let us know it’s time to eat. Suddenly, people are
everywhere and congregating around each vat; taking turns to peek inside. Smelling all the
different spices the steam released into the air, folks laugh and argue, argue and laugh more over
what spices should be used. A lot of ribbing about the cooking always led to more and more
laughs as everyone gets involved swearing their recipe is far better. Before you can even finish
eating, the music starts up again and people dance while others eat. This is where my love for
food begins. In a place where food is never eaten in haste like a snake snaring its prey. It is
treasured, enjoyed, and savored with friends; old and new.

The sun starts to settle over the crest, beyond the trees, past the levy berm and folks have
already begun their way to saying goodbye to everyone, especially Mercy. While my family
stands out like a grain of white rice against a black sand beach, here, is where my parents can
dance, laugh, and hug friends without fear of reprisal. Here, there is no color barrier; we are one.
This is where I learned acceptance. When we recognize and focus on the elements inside
someone, we get to see how we are more alike than not. When we begin to see others as equal,
that’s when we realize just what being free from hate truly means.

The drive back is long and we are all tired from a good day of food, friends, and fun, but
it’s not over until we are safely tucked into our beds. There is an air that dawdles and becomes
heavier with each passing mile-marker. That air is thick with prejudice and fear of not knowing which person, whether neighbor or stranger, is someone you can trust with your secrets.

My dad pulls into the driveway that runs alongside of the triplex where we live. He parks in the back and lifts my sister from the backseat. She is slightly awakened from the rustling caused as he tries to put her in a way to easily carry her to bed. My mom is carrying herself as best as she can from pure exhaustion. That short walk from the car to the front door seems twice as long than normal and provides enough time for our neighbor to pop out and ask where we’ve been all day. You know that nosey neighbor who talks in a high-shrieking voice with such politeness she oozes fake southern hospitality? That’s the one. She lives next door and shrieks with delight how lovely it is to have us safe at home because, “Lord knows what could happen in these times.” Understanding her meaning, my mom flashes my dad ‘the look’ so he politely responds with a mustered grin, “We spent the day with friends out of town.” He then hurries inside with me in tow before any further inquiry is made. We did spend the day with friends and they do live outside of New Orleans, but we know it’s not the entire truth. This is where I learned to keep secrets. There is a fine line between the truth and a lie, especially when deliberately withholding pieces of our story. It is a sad necessity to keep some parts close to the chest in order to protect ourselves.

As I change into my pajamas, my mom helps my half-asleep sister change into hers when I notice she has the same pair on in blue. I’m too tired to entertain the idea of arguing with myself about changing them and climb into bed. With a kiss from my mom and a snap of the light switch, I’m in the dark staring at the ceiling as the light from the window flickers across. My bed is my safe place where I can be anything I want and go anywhere in the world free from hate. I think of better days as a possibility without knowing anything else. It’s in my gut that
there have to be! As I fade into a deep sleep, I imagine what I will be like when I grow up. Who
I will be? This is where I learned to dream. Knowing that things will get better and, someday, I
will no longer see this kind of hatred, I hold on to hope and optimism. Lying there, I relish in the
words Mercy whispered to me earlier in the day, “Don’t worry child, the grass is always
greener in my head, too.”