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The Blue Chip Cafe: Feeding Nostalgia

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Dr. Beasley

Writing as Social Action

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Introduction

Stories are important, even the stories that are untold. After learning about the cultural and historical significance of Lincolnville in St. Augustine, I began to imagine the stories of the people who lived in the area and visited the black-owned businesses. I chose to write a story centered around a fictional character while incorporating real people, like Frank Butler, and places. As the setting, I wanted to focus on the environment of the Blue Chip Café, a black-owned restaurant operated out of someone's home. The building has since been demolished, and I wanted to reflect on the constant changes being made to the city of St. Augustine where certain areas and buildings, especially in Lincolnville, are being updated and erased. While buildings do not last forever, writing can keep the past alive, even fiction.

The Blue Chip Café: Feeding Nostalgia

I saw the owner of the business walk into the back as I briefly glanced beyond Frank's gaze, but I could not remember his name. Was it Robert Bell? Victor? I could not remember. I think he may have gone to the same church as me.

"Do you know why they call this place the Blue Chip Café?" I asked Frank.

"You know, I am not sure. I like to imagine that they chipped one of their blue plates and used that as inspiration for the name. Although, their plates are white, so it is unlikely."

"Maybe they make blue chips," we both laughed. I suppose we would never know the reasoning behind the name, but we both agreed it would be better to live with the mystery.

I watched as more people filled the room hoping for a place to rest from the Florida heat.

"So, how are all of your business endeavors?" I laughed.

"Very good. I cannot afford to lose my ambitious streak, especially when dealing with all of this discrimination. I mean we can't even eat at a lunch counter when the owner is white."

"The world is very rough right now. I do not mind this place. I would much rather be where I am happily welcomed and accepted," I paused. Frank looked off into the distance thinking. I decided to change the subject. "How is Arthur? I haven't seen him in a long time."

"He's great. The Iceberg has really taken off. He has even been shipping the ice cream they make to other places in Florida. I think he may even start to send it up north."

"That's amazing! I love to see old friends succeed, especially with the current state of the country."

"Yes, his success is well deserved after all of his hard work. Don't tell him I said this, but I do prefer this cafe to the Iceberg," Frank said with a laugh. "I am sure he will get to this level soon."

"I heard a rumor that he was going to add a pharmacy to the Iceberg. Seems like a strange combination, but his stepson Otis just finished up at pharmacy school."

"Wow that is quite the combination. I'm sure people around here will appreciate it. Also, there's someone I have been meaning to introduce you to, so remind me later."

"Not another potential man for me. We've talked about this," I laughed again knowing nothing would stop Frank from introducing me to all his friends he found good enough for me. I decided to change the subject. "While I am asking about old friends, how is Shellie doing?"

"Ah yes. My brother is doing fine. His grocery store on Central Avenue has gained a good crowd of usual shoppers. I remember when he just cut up all the meat for my store. He would do that nearly every morning. I suppose he got a little sick of it and decided to follow in my footsteps. Anyway, how is your family?"

My grandmother used to live here. I found one of her diaries in a box after she died. A lot has changed since the past. She used to take my mother to the Blue Chip Café, but she told me it was demolished in 1996. It is sad how nostalgic places are destroyed. I used to walk down the road where it used to be. Then, I would walk to her house unable to ever go inside again without concerning the new owners. Now, I avoid the area since it always reminds me of childhood and her.

When I want to talk to her, I read her diaries. It is the closest I can get to real conversation. Instead of my typical random flip though, I wanted to read something new. There was an untouched box of papers that I was told held nothing but old bills. Inside, I found an old photograph that piqued my interest. What was it? It looked like a photo of an old house. This was the Blue Chip Cafe, and its memory was contained in this photo by my grandmother.



105 ½ Central Avenue. The back of the photograph explained that it was near the Excelsior School and the Lincolnville Community House. I wonder if my grandmother went to those places too.

This was a place where someone lived. The owners invited people into their homes to provide a place accepting of black people, unlike the segregated restaurants. I could almost picture my grandmother walking into the wooden frame and meeting a friend for lunch. She would wear one of her gray dresses and a hat. She would fill the space around her with the nostalgic aroma of her sweet perfume. I missed her. I wish I could enter the photo, and she would be inside waiting to meet me for lunch.

“Come inside. I’ve ordered your favorite tea, but it is starting to get cold,” I could imagine her say as if I could walk inside the doors of the past almost smelling the earl grey inside of a blue, slightly chipped teacup.

“It feels like forever since I have seen you. Sorry I’m late,” I would respond. When she was alive, my grandmother was always an advocator for punctuality.

“Do not worry about being late. I love this place and this table in particular. I used to meet all of my good friends here, including your grandfather,” she would say.

“Why do you love this table?” I would ask even though I already knew the answer.

“Your grandfather and I were actually introduced here by a mutual friend. We sat at this very table. We were always welcome here by the owners. Our friend was quite the businessman and schemer. His name was Frank Butler,” she would explain and begin to tell me the story again. I loved to hear her talk about how she met my grandfather and all of their stories with their friends. She would talk about the hardships and the highlights of the past.

“Can you tell me about them again?” I wish I could ask. Nothing else could fill me with interest like the way she told stories. Some were hard to hear with all of the suffering that came with a segregated world. Most of all, I loved the stories she would tell about Frank and my grandfather.

“Well, there was this time Frank took me to lunch, and he began to tell me all about his business endeavors and old friends. Anyway, he began to drop hints that he wanted me to meet one of his friends he thought I would get along with...”