

Loyalty

Summer 2000. It was the year I retired from the City University of New York, where I had worked for over twenty eight years. I knew it was the right time to leave. I was ready. One of my retirement gifts was a night downtown in Greenwich Village at the Blue Note Club to see Ruth Brown: Ms. Rhythm as she was called. It was a great show that brought back a lot of memories. After the show, Ms. Brown's assistant who had met my younger daughter, years earlier, invited us backstage to meet Ms. Brown.

Ms. Brown greeted us with a big smile.

"Would you believe I met you forty-six years ago?" I said.

"Really? Where?"...

"In Hallandale, Florida."

She bent her head, slightly sideways, searching her mind...

"Do you remember, the Palms Park?" I asked her.

She stared at me for a second as if she was trying to remember.

"I'm not sure," she said.

"It was a one story structure." I explained.

"The front was closed in. The back was open with a wall only to the waist and a roof that extended over the walking area around the seats. Large palm trees surrounded the outer area with additional seats. It looked small from the outside, but it was large inside."

"Wait a minute. Was the bar close to the front entrance on the left side?"

"Yes," I confirmed.

"Oh my goodness, I remember that small town now."

"Would you believe, I was seventeen years old?" I said.

"Really?"

"Every Wednesday was teenage night. Teenagers came from all over South Florida to the Palms. It was always packed with very little space to dance. I saw Dinah Washington and Ray Charles too."

"Did, BB King ever go there?"

“Oh! Yes! Little Richard, James Brown, the Drifters, and Clyde McPhatter. They all came to the Palms for a week. So, because of teenage night I got to see them.”

“That’s such a long time ago,” she said, shaking her head and smiling as if she were enjoying the idea that I still wanted to see her perform after so many years.

She reached in a box under the table next to her and pulled out a copy of her book: *Ms. Rhythm*, signed it and gave it to me.

Earlier, watching Ms. Brown’s performance, I sat back and allowed memories to reclaim the year I saw her at the Palms. But, an unpleasant incident that was buried in my subconscious surfaced. I was fifteen years old, inquisitive, bright-eyed and innocent. My school didn’t go past 9th grade, and we could not attend the school across the tracks close to our neighborhood. We had to catch a bus and travel out-of- town to a school for colored children. Many colored students attended Attucks High School in Dania or car pooled to Booker T. Washington in Miami or to Dillard in Fort Lauderdale. Riding the bus my first term in high school, I met Zelma, a new girl in town. We became good friends. By January, the next year, she dropped out of school.

One day, I was looking out of my bedroom window and Zelma’s boyfriend passed my house with his arm wrapped around another girl. I was shocked. I felt sorry for my friend because she thought they were getting married. A few days later, visiting my cousin, I found out that Zelma’s boyfriend lived with the girl he was hugging and their two children next door to my cousin. I thought about what I saw, worried about it for days, and decided to tell my friend. Her eyes first repelled the message, but the strong disbelief was snatched out of her face by the possibility of truth and was replaced with doubt. Her eyes flashed a quick almost concealed hate towards me. She dropped her head, straightened up her back, turned and walked away. Then, she turned back and broke down in a desperate cry of grief that we both knew had severed our friendship and perhaps her relationship with her unborn baby’s daddy. Immediately, I felt so sad and sorry for her.

“Maybe, the other girl doesn’t mean anything to him,” I said. She stood near me for a few minutes with her head down. She stared at her feet. Then, slowly she turned, and walked away. But, before she walked too far, I asked her, “Please don’t tell him I told you I saw him.”

Without looking back at me, she promised, “I won’t tell him who told me.”

At that moment, I wish I had not seen or said anything. Two days later, waiting at the school bus stop, I turned my head and confronted a face with hate-filled eyes and a mouth spilling out threats with fingers pointing in my face.

“If you ever go back and tell Zelma you saw me again, I’ll beat your ass.” I stood there afraid, shocked, and embarrassed.

I was not only frightened, but, angry. Angry with Zelma for telling him, angry with him for threatening me, and most of all angry at myself for getting involved in the first place. But, at the time, I thought it was the right thing to do for a friend. That day, I promised myself that I would

never tell on someone, especially if I were not sure that what I had to say would benefit the person who receives the message.

Two years later, I was at the Palms Park on teenage night. James Brown was on stage singing, "Try Me." The floor was full of teenagers slow dragging. I had passed up that dance to go to the bathroom. I turned my head searching the crowd for others whom I knew, when far on the side of the next room, where the adults were at the bar and where the bathroom was located, I saw a familiar form. I could not move. It was my sister's husband. He was standing behind a woman at the bar. Like an octopus, his hands and mouth were in full motion, caressing her body, whispering in her ears, and kissing her neck. In shock, I stared. I could not believe what I was seeing. As I began to back away, still staring, the energy of my stare must have pricked his conscience because he turned around and looked back right in my face. His stretched eyes and my disappointed eyes locked for a moment. I caught myself, backed up, turned swiftly and moved forward.

I opened the door of the bathroom, walked in and stood in the corner for a while, shaking inside. I could feel tears gathering behind my eyes. I was crying for the hurt that I knew my sister would feel if she found out her husband was unfaithful. I felt ashamed and sympathy for my sister, especially, if she ever found out that his behavior was on display. I could not understand. Earlier that day, my sister and her husband were laughing and hugging each other with caring expressions while playing with their children in the kiddie pool. And, to think, I respected and liked him.

I had stumbled on a scene that I was sorry I saw; and worst of all, I didn't know what to do with what I saw. My sister was a grown woman much older than I. I had no right dipping into grown folks' business. Was I supposed to tell Mama? No. I didn't want to worry her. Should I confront my sister's husband? No. he would tell me to mind my damn business. The question was, why tell her? Why hurt her? They seemed so happy. Why spoil that. I did not want to cause trouble. For days, I worried about what to do. I carried that burden, holding it inside wishing I could drop the weight. Finally, I decided to keep my mouth shut. Then, guilt rode my back. That scene, the shame, the guilt haunted me. Was I disloyal for not telling her?

For years, I grappled with the idea of loyalty. But, I eased my conscience because he didn't change how he treated my sister, and I truly believed that they loved each other, although I could not understand his behavior. They stayed together until she died many years later.

Have a happy Holiday, peace of mind, health, and prosperity.

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