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Candace King

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Creative Nonfiction Category

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### The Details in an Abyss of Worries

The car ride prior to whatever destination that year's family trip intended was always a memorable experience on its own. My dad was the pilot of the car. He controlled the air conditioning (which was always one degree too hot) while antagonizing other drivers on the road to entertain himself. My step-mom, Michele, was in charge of the music. She would absentmindedly scroll through the stations while she perused Facebook on her iPad. Every now and then Michele would stumble upon the Spanish station and my dad would sing along in a horrible accent that bordered on offensive. My brother would claim this never happened, but it would be because he was sleeping for the entire trip. If I stared at my phone for too long in the car I would feel light-headed and nauseous, so I busied myself with listening to One Direction and staring out the window, lost in my thoughts. Eventually, we would reach our location, and my family would switch gears to their vacation roles. Michele's job was to keep us on schedule, and my dad's job was to keep her from stressing out when we were one minute late to lunch. While my brother enjoyed being a tourist, he also played the part of an angsty teenager. My family would tell you that my job was to complain, but in reality I just wanted to feel safe instead of incredibly anxious. Unfortunately, I couldn't leave my anxiety at home. Once I left the comforting familiarity of the car, my anxiety returned like an annual cold. This would ruin the entire trip for me. Thankfully, this wasn't entirely true for our trip to New Orleans.

There are a couple of things I remember from my family trip to New Orleans. The first is a white cathedral that towered over psychics and other vendors who were hoping to lure unsuspecting tourists into their trap. The second is a small outdoor pastry shop where we snacked on buttery bread with soft sugar sprinkled on top while watching the bustle of everyday life continue on the other side of a fence. Besides these two memories, the majority of the trip was full of unpleasant feelings of anxiety. The crowds of strangers constantly surrounding me made my heart flutter in an uncomfortable way. The unfamiliar surroundings made me crave home more than ever before. I have experienced similar emotions on countless other trips, including one where I was supposedly in the happiest place on Earth. Not even the childish wonders of Disney World could ease my fast-beating heart and sweaty palms when I was surrounded by hundreds of strangers. Whenever someone asks me to recount my trip to New Orleans, I can't bring myself to mention the delicious pastries or impressive architecture. Instead I describe how anxious I felt the entire trip and how I wished to be in the hotel room each second I wasn't in it.

Although there are few, my favorite memory from New Orleans was when we had an impromptu snack at an outdoor pastry restaurant. After we each had our fair share of powdered sugar and buttery bread, my dad and step-mom split ways. My dad took my brother back to the vendors so he could decide on a souvenir, but I wasn't keen on returning to the crowded tents. It was the early afternoon, and the blazing sun was providing its well-intentioned but unbearable heat. I was feeling hot and anxious, so my step-mom took me back to the cathedral. The New Orleans cathedral was the heart of the city. It was a glorious white building that loomed over the surrounding buildings. Its black turrets cast shadows over the many people staring at it from below appreciating its beautiful details. There were strangers bustling about in every direction

and cheap fortune tellers advertising their craft to anyone who walked by. Gentle music filled the air with a lively feeling, but my focus was on finding somewhere to sit.

“Let’s sit down in the shade over there,” Michele suggested, leading me towards the short steps in front of the cathedral. We sat in the shade taking sips of luke-warm water from Michele’s traveling backpack. “That’s cool!” Michele said, gesturing with the water bottle to something in front of her.

We had unintentionally sat down in front of the musicians playing live music. There was a man sitting behind a set of drums embracing the appearance of a stereotypical young musician. His long hair was pulled back with a tan bandana, his blue t-shirt snug across his torso, the short-sleeves exposing tattoos on his left bicep. His head bobbed along to the music as he casually played along to the beautiful sound emitting from the musician in front. A sign was placed in front of a stereo and behind a basket for tips. It read, “IT’S A KORA AFRICAN BASS HARP” in white bubble letters. The instrument this man was playing (the Kora African Bass Harp) was the most interesting and confusing instrument I have ever seen. Its shape was similar to a banjo, but only if you enlarge the banjo to three times its size. The spherical base of the instrument was covered in white and brown cloth with black stitching. He held the entire instrument in front of himself, where two bars protruded from this with no purpose but for the musician to hold with three of his fingers while his thumb and pointer played with the strings. The strings extended about three feet from the base of the instrument on a larger bar rising between the two handles. The man playing the Kora African Bass Harp moved his body to the music, aware of the captivated audience, but also completely immersed in the music.

Beautiful does not begin to describe the sound that these men had perfected. The drummer’s gentle tapping of the cymbals created a calming background beat for the man playing

the Kora African Bass Harp. The bass harp was true to its name. It sounded as though three or four different instruments were being played, but the man was just holding the one. The loudest of the sounds coming from this instrument could be distinguished as a bass guitar. After listening harder, it's easier to distinguish the elegant sound of the harp, but it's less classical and more modern. The drums, bass, and harp mixed together create a melody so calming that even my travel anxiety was beginning to ebb away.

“That’s really cool,” I said. I took out my phone and recorded a quick video of the duo, planning to show my mom when we got back home. The song they were playing ended, and the men nodded appreciatively at the applauding audience.

“Do you want to tip them?” Michele asked as she pulled out her wallet.

In the past when I have seen live street music my dad always lightly pressured me to tip the musician. He knew I had an anxiety disorder before I learned that anxiety was a word. He believed that little things like tipping a stranger playing lovely music would help me overcome it. I always told him no, to ask my brother instead. I didn’t want to walk in front of a crowd of people listening to music and distract them by throwing spare change into a guitar case. I didn’t want the musician to talk to me and thank me while I would give an awkward smile or say “You’re welcome!” with a stutter or a voice crack.

“No, thanks,” I responded to Michele, not even considering approaching these impressive musicians when I myself was an awkward, pimply teenager.

“Are you sure? I’m going to tip them a five. Why don’t you just walk up there with me?” Michele urged in a not-so-subtle attempt to help me overcome my anxiety. When I hesitated she insisted further, “I want to ask about the instrument he has! I’m sure it would be cool to know

more about it.” She looked at me with an encouraging smile, and I reluctantly agreed to walk up there with her.

The musicians had yet to start their next song so we hurried up to the basket and Michele tipped them. As she talked to the man about his instrument I looked around, feeling uncomfortable. I noticed he had a small basket filled with CD’s of his music. I was tempted to buy one, but my dad was keeping my money, and I was planning on spending it all on a unique souvenir. Plus, I would have to ask the man how much it cost. If the price was reasonable, I would have to pay him which required eye contact and proper communication skills. I resigned to standing behind my step-mom pulling my flannel tighter around me. Hiding from someone’s gaze and avoiding talking in front of people was not a foreign scene. School presentations had me familiar with the nagging thought in the back of my mind telling me everyone was judging me while I fought for the correct words to leave my mouth.

Once Michele was done complementing the men on their talent, we went back to sit on the shaded curb. We waited for our family while listening to the musicians’ songs and then headed to lunch once my dad and brother showed up. While we waited for our food at the restaurant, I showed my dad the video I took of the magnificent instrument. After he politely watched it even though he saw it live himself moments before, I turned off my phone and began to eat the food that had just arrived. This was the last I thought of the Kora African Bass Harp that trip, but its music continued to resonate with me for the next day until we were back in the car on the way home. I wasn’t aware of how it lifted my anxiety until much later in life when I found personal coping mechanisms. I realized later that the remainder of my New Orleans trip was spent appreciating its history instead of dreading being in public. The live music opened my eyes to New Orleans’ rich history and all the memories it had to offer.

When I revisit all of my anxious memories, I wonder if hearing the duo's music live would have changed anything. Perhaps when I was in the Magic Kingdom – falling victim to hundreds of tourists jostling me around for a picture in front of Cinderella's castle – if the musicians were there my anxiety would have ceased. I could have gone with the current instead of fight it. I might have even let my mom take my picture instead of shoving her phone out of my face. When I stood in front of the classroom full of judgmental pre-teens, I could have looked to the back of the room and seen a drummer and a man holding the most unique instrument, both lost in their music, part of them blissfully ignorant to the judgement from every watching eye. I could have mirrored this confidence, standing up straighter and speaking with a clear voice.

Or perhaps, instead of relying on one moment of a joyous anxiety-free memory, I can search for something similar in the individual moments when a burst of anxiety overcomes me. Instead of worrying about the tourists on every side of me, I could have glanced upward and let the baby blue castle lure me in. Instead of staring into the sea of eyes staring at me and formulating their negative judgements about me, I could have created positive encouragements they would say when they saw my hands shaking as I held onto my paper. The Kora African Bass Harp has inspired me to search for the comforting details, instead of getting lost in the abyss of worries.