

PROSPECT PARK

Time changes with every second, and Bluff City seasons evolve from one extreme to the next, but days and nights were homogeneous in Prospect Park's small working-class Memphis neighborhood.

Small brick houses, similar in style except for one, sat in a single file on streets named Alcy, Ball, Colgate, and others. The one exception was a white clapboard house on Colgate Street separated by a chain-linked fence on each side of the small backyard, with growing flowers in tediously kept plots scattered across the front.

Facing the house, you saw four-foot-wide gray concrete steps leading to a thin concrete porch that was not large enough for a single chair. The porch led to a screen door in front of a wooden door. The two doors were usually closed, but not always.

Some days, without warning, a figure emerged from behind the screen door as the rusting spring screamed and the door slammed. Then, a distinct appearance immediately drew the attention of all. She would pause momentarily, adjusting her short-sleeved loose-fitting dress, tied with a skinny black belt encircled above a round belly, before advancing across the front lawn.

Flat black shoes, shoulder-length gray hair under a stained white hair net, and a slight slouch would be forgotten when she spotted a wayward child's possession left unattended or one of the youngsters passing too close to her property. Discarded bicycles lying unattended, balls, and clothing would disappear before children realized they had been taken. Her protective instincts were always on high alert, especially if she was outside tending her plants.

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Appearing as a gravitationally challenged lioness protecting her den, standing taller and leaning forward, she became a sprinter, consistently winning the race to claim a cherished item or intercept a juvenile traveler's possessions.

Afterward, mocking the child with a slight skipping dance toward the house added a touch of humor to the scene, although she was never seen smiling or uttering a word. Other times, her ability to manage a standard water hose spray often meant she could dampen a passing child at a great distance and did so without warning before returning to water her many flowers and shrubs.

Miss Fuller lived alone. Her face was always expressionless, and no words ever left her mouth. Yet, despite not speaking, her actions betrayed her with the knowledge that she despised children and guarded her property from them.

Miss Fuller's house was on Colgate Street. The Cook's house was on one side of her, and the Drewry's house was on the other. Two houses away from her, on the other side of the Cook's home, were Mister and Mrs. Burke. There were children in the Cook and Drewry family with noisy, playful neighborhood friends. While the childless Burke couple only verbally insulted passing Prospect Park children, Miss Fuller, also childless, took it to a much higher level and became both notorious and locally infamous.

For every child in Prospect Park, the front of Miss Fuller's home was a daunting challenge, especially when she hid behind the giant tree in her front yard. The water hose across her property reminded passing children of the potential for soaking.

Rice Drewry and Steve Cook, perched quietly on the banana seats of identical Schwinn Stingray bicycles, could only hear birds and Hooker Hood's motorcycle blocks away on Norris Road. Steve Cook knew this was when Miss Fuller was most dangerous, so Steve convinced

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Rice to move forward and test the waters. Rice is initially reluctant because of Steve and the bees, but that's another story.

Overcoming his hesitancy, Rice balances precariously, shifting his weight from side to side before pressing one pedal forward and riding high above the banana seat. He moves forward slowly, his growing tentativeness showing in his efforts to pedal as his small feet slide off the bicycle's polished metal pedals multiple times.

Upon closer observation, Rice verifies that only the screen door at the house's front door is closed. The darkness inside does not show her rocking back and forth within the shadows as she often did, so Rice moves more forward, and Steve follows.

Miss Fuller appeared as suddenly as lightning springing from behind the tree, pulling slack from the tightened water hose. She bombarded them with water from her sprayer as They reversed course, but it was too late. Steve arrived at his house next door immediately but passed it and led Rice, both soaking wet, around the city block to Rice's house on the other side of Miss Fuller.

When they arrived at Rice's home, Steve spotted Miss Fuller from the Drewry's front yard without the water hose in her grasp. Determined to taunt her, he sped ferociously past the front of her property as she fumbled with the water hose, missing a second opportunity to spray him.

For the remainder of the day, the two boys remained inside their respective houses, periodically surveying the clapboard house next door from both sides until late afternoon or early evening, and both sets of parents arrived.

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When the Drewry and Cook parents were advised of the two boys' reason for muddy footprints on clean floors and damp clothes discarded recklessly, the two young boys were ordered to "Stay away from Miss Fuller's property."

While Rice would follow his parents' advice, Steve would not. He seldom did as he was told, and Miss Fuller disliked him more than the others.

To Miss Fuller, any passing child was fair game for her mischief, not just the ones nearby. She occasionally took items unattended by distracted children visiting neighbors before running inside her house and peeking through her curtains.

There seemed to be no way to discourage her from this mischief without involving the police and experiencing the embarrassment that would surely follow.

In the past, strong, frustrated parents approached her a few times while she worked in her yard, demanding the return of the children's possessions. She never responded, only staring at the concerned parents with a blank look on her weathered face before returning inside her house.

One afternoon, Prissy Cook held a red balloon with a long string, wasn't paying attention, and ventured close to the fence between Miss Fuller's home and the Cooks' home. Miss Fuller leaned over the chained leaked top and snatched the balloon from Prissy's tiny hands. Confused, she turned to see Miss Fuller and her precious balloon disappearing into Miss Fuller's house.

One year younger than Steve, Prissy did not fault Miss Fuller for wanting her balloon because it was a pretty balloon, and Miss Fuller might have needed it more than she did. Steve, on the other hand, decided enough was enough. Prissy watched as Steve and his friend from Rutger's Street, Steve called him Luffer, increased their taunting of Miss Fuller.

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One morning, Steve stood only feet from her front door, taunting her, when suddenly she appeared running toward him from her backyard, only steps away.

“Behind you, Miss Fuller! Look!” Steve screamed.

Miss Fuller fell for the oldest trick in the world, and Steve sprinted toward the safety of his house next door to imagine how Miss Fuller could have covered so much ground so quickly without him seeing her.

This was as close as Miss Fuller would get to Steve, although his taunting of her increased substantially when he began ringing a large cowbell he had acquired from God knows where. He rattled the beast without regard for others until his mother snatched it from him.

Mr. and Mrs. Cook seemed to understand Steve’s taunting of Miss Fuller and thought it was funny. As long as he did not lose their trust and do something illegal or immoral, they would not interfere, and the Cook children knew this—all of them—three girls, Drinda, Vicki, Prissy, and Steve. The youngest was sweet little Prissy Cook. Miss Fuller knew Prissy was kind-hearted, and after the balloon episode, Miss Fuller watched her but did not bother her again.

Refusing to allow a bad neighbor to intimidate and dictate the actions of others seems to solve neighborhood problems, and the issues with Miss Fuller were solved by patience and the passage of time.

Months passed, seasons changed, and families moved from Prospect Park to Memphis's growing Whitehaven area. Houses were bought and sold one by one, and as they did, Prospect Park grew quieter when new families arrived, and Miss Fuller no longer mattered.

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Prospect Park neighbors in the 1960s became Whitehaven neighbors during the 1970s and beyond, continuing their close-knit friendships as the children attended schools in new neighborhoods before adulthood took them from a world they thought they knew. Then, an exodus to Collierville began as Memphis dynamics worsened, and only a handful remained in the Whitehaven area.

Children of the '60s and '70s became grandparents of the 21st century. Sixty years after those decades, a 95th birthday party for Jeannine Blackwell became an impromptu Prospect Park reunion in Collierville, bringing the old neighborhood back to life with each recollection, correction, and story long forgotten. Remembrances of Rabbit Cook, Bubba Blackwell, Hooker Hood, and others came back to life in the memories and cherished pictures shared on tables and bookshelves, on cell phones and in billfolds.

When Miss Fuller was mentioned as a former member of the Prospect Park neighborhood, there were snickers, smiles, and whispered stories. The stories about her were no longer from terrorized children but from adults now as old as Miss Fuller was in their youth.

Throughout the storytelling, one seemingly small thing was considered and agreed upon.

No one remembered Miss Fuller speaking or smiling. They remembered her stoic, never-changing appearance and uncharacteristic actions.

The room became quiet when Prissy Cook said, “Once, she appeared suddenly with her water hose, and I said, Hello, Miss Fuller, and she smiled at me.”

It was a simple smile yet monumental to everyone there. Only one person saw it years ago as a small child, and the others could only now, so many years later, attempt to imagine it.

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The possibility of Miss Fuller smiling had given them a perspective on someone they thought they knew but were now not so sure they did.

Whether it was from the realization they had eaten all of Dawn Edward's delicious catered food and there was none left for later or an uneasy feeling of guilt from talking about someone they might have misunderstood, something seemed to change the festive mood to a solemn one.

Considering the stories and understanding that there must be some closure to put Miss Fuller's tales in perspective, there was only one viable conclusion.

If Miss Fuller had known she had disrupted the Prospect Park reunion, if only briefly, without being there, because of one smile, she might have smiled again... or maybe not.

Rest easy, Miss Fuller, wherever you are. You're a Prospect Park Legend.