I Wish I Could Just Go Back by Jessyca Mathews

My grandmother's windows always seemed so massive to me as a child. The three immensely large panels of glass were located in front of the dinner table. In the same room directly across from the glass was a television tucked in the far corner. Inside the same space was set of comfortable Lazy Boy chairs that reclined to make visitors feel comfortable, and a blanket covered the couch. The accessories found around the room changed as fashion and time dictated. The things that have remained consistent over the decades were four chairs with worn upholstery tucked carefully under a sturdy table, and the gigantic windows for me to glaze out of to see the world.

The table, made of invincible oak, still stands in the house many years later and has survived generations of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. It has a rose-tinted plastic covering on it to make sure that if spills of red Faygo soda pop occurred, it could easily be cleaned up with the quick swoop of my grandmother's tanned hand clasping a paper towel. The sunlight that shined through the window on beautiful days always would make a bright glare off the plastic placed on the table that blinded your eyes.

All these memorable structures are in what my elders called the "family" room, which got it's name from the many gatherings and conversations done during holidays, times of crisis, and after Sunday morning church service. The windows are always clean because grandma made sure to scrub it weekly with her concoction of water and vinegar. The smell of her cleaning solutions could rise from the glass on an extremely warm day as if something was baking for us to enjoy.

Outside the window is my grandmother's garden. It's filled with her vegetables that she grows each season. She surrounds it with small barbed wire and stakes made of scrap metal and wooden planks to keep the animals from intruding her fortress. The garden, and the wire that surrounds these wholesome foods are a lot like grandmother. Inside the garden were items filled with things to make a child grow to be healthy and strong, just the same as the knowledge and stories she passed on to me. She, along with her vegetables, was beautiful to look at. Both demanded each person to admire how they have come from nothing and grown into something special.

The fence protecting the garden was like the other side of grandmother. Both were small, rugged, and tough when it came to protecting pests and villains from the outside world. That fence was like her words, covered with sharp spikes for protection in case someone dared to ruin her exemplary work. I once asked her "Why protect the garden with such harsh material?" She turned her head slowly in my direction and said with a stern voice, "I don't have time for rabbits to come and steal all ma' hard work."

The veggies of many assortments could be found right outside the window. She grew stalks of butter beans and delicious bell peppers. She planted other things outside the window, like her one turnip plant that she thought was adorable due to its tiny stature, but she had extra wire to protect her collard greens. They were her favorite. I knew that they were her prize possession in the garden by the amount of dirt that would be found on her gardening gloves and the knees of her jeans when she would come back from checking on them. Collard Greens received more love than the others garden participants because they took more time to prepare when she would cook the prizes of her garden.

The food was always eaten in front of the window. When grandmother found it to be the right time, she would go out and pick only the best items to serve her family. The process would not be a fast one. First, she would soak her vegetables overnight. The star of the show, the collards, would receive their soaking in the kitchen sink. As grandmother always said, "They soak to take out anything bad: dirt wedged in its fibers, insects that were nibblin' on the leaves... Everything needs to be clean." There would be the smell of grandmother's water mixture boiling on the stove to cook each participant in the garden. The raw bacon or slabs of ham hocks would be simmering in a recipe of seasoning salt and garlic powder in the large silver pot that she only used on the back burner of the stove.

There would also be other foods cooking in the kitchen. The aroma of grandma's fried chicken takes over the odors of the vegetable grown just outside. Grandmother always made the best fried chicken, and I would smile watching her prepare her meal for us in the busy kitchen. The refrigerator door would open with a brisk tug on its handle, and she would retrieve the items to help in preparing her meal. The buttermilk that she dips each part of the chicken in would drip on the counter. She insisted that this had to be done to "makes the spices stick to da skin", and then it would be placed in a bowl of flour and other secret ingredients. It was always prepared to perfection. I would take my place at the table, and there would be a clunk of the porcelain plate hitting the wood. I would bite into the drumstick and enjoy the stream of oil that runs down my chin. The bitter tang of the collard greens were to follow, and I would smile as I stared outside the window of wonder.

Despite this country setting outside the panes of glass of my grandparents’ home, there was a reminder that they indeed lived in a richer subdivision in Kalamazoo. Their neighbors to the left had a swimming pool. At times, her neighbors would come out and have parties, filled with visitors who splashed and played around in the clear, blue water. When there were parties, I sometimes found myself opening up the bottom portions of the window to listen to the activity outside by the neighbors while I ate. There were laughter and the sound of water rushing down the slide that carried the people next door to the cool pool enjoyment below. This happened occasionally during the times that I would visit. Usually, there were sounds of nature.

At night, I could hear the chirping of crickets invading grandmother's garden. As the hours passed, the noise of the insects grew louder. If grandmother were working late in the garden, I would sometimes join her and sit in the grass. At times would see lightning bugs flash their bodies like fireworks on the Fourth of July for attention. Sometimes I would make an adventure in trying to catch these bugs in small mason jars that she had saved from her years of living in the south. I took joy in securing these tiny critters that chirped, flew, and stung the skin in defense of survival. The pretty prisoners would be observed for a short time, then released into the hot summer night's air when grandmother has finished her duties of gardening.

When evening would make its appearance, and grandmother was done toiling the soil for the day, I would still spend time by the window. Late at night at the ends of summer I would raise my head and smell the beginnings of a bond fire. This activity would be miles away, but I can still smell its unique scent. The wood burns and bring delight to others at a distance, and the smell of the twigs and leaves that they have added to the blaze shows a sign of bonding and togetherness.

Occasionally I would notice daring animals walking along the path that rose as a divider between my grandparent's yard and their neighbor's to the right. It was surrounded by rose bushes and other beautiful flowers of yellow, blue, and pink. At times, there would be a deer who had wandered off its path. It would mysteriously peek back at me through the window early in the morning. It would dart away once it saw me move as if I were the one staring into his home. My ears would hear the hissing of a garter snake that would be slithering in the grass, or a rabbit nibbling at the cabbage that grew too long for a grandmother to protect.

I wish that I could walk back to my place at the table in front of the window. Those times seem so long ago. I wish that I could be that child again. Be there to hear the clank of the plate being placed down in front of me at that wooden table, filled with pieces of fried chicken and southern style collard greens. I wish I could hear the laughter of the neighbors. The pool next door is not used anymore, and a privacy fence stands like dominoes at attention to keep me from watching what now happens at their home. Everything has changed.

These windows were the overseers of many of days in my childhood during the summer. They have watched me wonder, eat, admire, and grow. It still stands, with new curtains and new experiences, and it is a reminder that memories such as these can't be taken away from me. In many ways, it was the eyes of the people who surrounded me, and watched me as much as I watched it. I needed this window, to remember the positives of my childhood and to know the beauty of simplicity.