
MY FAMILY AND OTHER ANIMALS

(TITLE BORROWED FROM GERALD DURRELL)

BY DK CRAWFORD

“We are all a little weird and life’s a little weird, and when we find someone whose weirdness is compatible with ours, we join up with them and fall in mutual weirdness and call it love. Are we not like two volumes of one book?”

—*Author Unknown*

I had the unusual family on the block. Block, hell—we were known throughout the whole neighborhood. There was always something happening at the Crawford House and people were either afraid of it or wanted to be a part of it.

I grew up in an up-and-coming subdivision in Lafayette, Louisiana. My father was a handsome Texas oilman and my mother a Southern belle housewife from Jackson, Mississippi—at least those were the costumes they wore for most of the world. Underneath those very proper exteriors lived an experimental farmer/rancher and avid aviator and an artist/gourmet cook who studied mythology on the side.

While other households were venturing into the modern world of packaged foods, mine was digging up a perfectly good backyard to put in organic vegetable gardens and fruit trees. While some dads were out coaching Little League, mine was flying off in our plane to the glaciers of Alaska or digging deep into the earth to make a pond in which he could raise the baby Malaysian prawns that would arrive next week from Hawaii.

The larger-scale projects happened at the 82.5-acre farm Dad escaped to each day and the smaller ones at home, at 601 Brentwood Boulevard. In our house, courtesy of my father, we always had homegrown produce, freshly hunted game and honey from our own hives. Mom kept the heart of the house stoked with warm pots of yogurt incubating and loaves of homemade honey wheat bread coming out of the oven. She was also the person who challenged her creativity to cook all the myriad ingredients Dad brought home each week from soybeans to quail, blackberries to 15-inch-long prawns. They were a creative conspiracy and we rarely had a dull day.

I was enraptured in the fantastical world of my childhood. My part was to help raise all the wild, orphaned animals people brought over. We were known as “that

family with all the animals.” I guess we were akin to the Clampetts. We had baby ’possums and a flying squirrel, an owl and skunk, a raccoon, wild rabbits and blue jays, to name but a few. We also had a mole that lived in a wheelbarrow full of dirt.

Even the animals seemed to know we were a safe haven, because occasionally one would drop its baby off on our back doormat. Dad also raised game fowl, so we’d have incubators of baby bantams and guineas sitting in the living room. Once I remember lifting the lid to check on the eggs and fully hatched baby birds escaped into the living room—peeping furiously and scattering all over the room! It took a couple of grueling days for us to find them all underneath and inside the furniture.

Our household at that time was an enchanted place to be and I never thought of our family as unusual until I started grade school and visited other households. When I began having sleepovers at friend’s houses I started to notice significant differences. My friends drank neon drinks like orange Tang and purple Kool-Aid on a regular basis. They had peanut butter that was much smoother than ours and didn’t have to be stirred. There were pizzas that showed up at the door when they dialed a number and I distinctly remember trying my first illicit McDonald’s cheeseburger after going through a drive-thru with a friend’s older brother. It was warm



Author and mom at the beach



Author (third from left) and author’s mother (far right) with other family and friends sitting on the bough of a century-old oak tree at the farm.

Vintage family snapshots and home movie stills courtesy of DK Crawford

and the bread was so white and sweet—I thought it was bliss.

They also had cable, video games and dark, cold, air-conditioned rooms they played in. I remember wanting to go visit my friends' homes so I could experience more of this hidden, world of sugary delights. When I mentioned these delicacies to my mother she shuddered and tried to explain to me that not every household had the time or money to enjoy really good food.

As new friends came over to my house to visit, I began to notice even more differences. First, the animals and the gardens surprised them—many had never even seen a vegetable garden, let alone roaming ducks and geese doing pest control. They couldn't fathom that we didn't have cable TV and spent most of our time playing outside.

I remember a small tear in the universe of my childhood when a friend and I were playing in the yard. She asked for a snack and I automatically went to the garden out back, pulled up a carrot, hosed it off and tried to hand it to her. The blank expression on her face spoke volumes. In our family we drank out of a hose and ate from the garden until it was mealtime. I knew better than to drag two dirty kids through the kitchen looking for snacks, something that basically didn't exist in our world, at least not the kind she was hoping for.

As I got toward the end of grade school I grew more self-conscious in my pre-adolescent ways and wanted more than anything to be "normal," but the schism just grew wider. My birthday gifts for other girls were cookie cutters and aprons instead of makeup or electronic games. My lunches had fresh fruits, veggies and thick slices of ripe tomatoes on home-baked bread with homemade mayonnaise or healthy peanut butter and honey while theirs had NuGrape canned sodas and Thermoses of SpaghettiOs. I longed to be more like them and begged my Mom to buy some of their ingredients.

A pinnacle moment came one day at school. The parents were asked to give a talk about their work or a hobby. I wasn't the most informed kid and hadn't even thought about mentioning this to my parents. I was sitting entranced after listening to one parent tell about his job at a radio station when out of the corner of my eye I saw a form coming in the door.

My mother was dressed head-to-toe in a beekeeper's outfit with smoke streaming out of a metal canister held in her gloved hand. She proceeded to smoke the classroom and explain the fundamentals of beekeeping while the other kids sat with their eyes (as large as dessert plates), fixed upon her. I kept sliding further and further down in my chair as she talked excitedly and waved the smoking canister around the classroom. Every now and then she gave me a huge grin and wink as if to say, "I knew this would be a hit!"

I was chagrined. I wanted to hide under my desk but there was no place to go. Every now and then a classmate would avert their eyes from my wildly animated, white suited, smoking mother and glance at me. I would sort of shrug my shoulders

and give them an insecure half smile.

After her presentation, my mother doused the smoke, took off the large saucer-shaped hat that covered her face with a hanging mesh veil, then her gloves, and started to unpack a picnic basket she'd brought. She passed around one Mason jar with holes punched in the lid that contained some of our live bees, and another with large chunks of honeycomb in it. She'd also brought freshly baked, still warm from our oven, loaves of honey wheat bread and fresh-churned butter.

"Oh no!" I thought to myself. Not only has my mother pranced around in the most conspicuous costume in the world, but now she's going to feed these kids something they certainly want no part of. I tried desperately to give her that "stop it" look kids give.

"Stop it, stop it now" I glared at her, willing her to get the

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Author's entrepreneurial father hosting crawfish boil at the farm.



Author's father holding elder sibling



Author's mother giving mischievous grin

message. But she was oblivious and proceeded to simultaneously smile at me and keep her audience spellbound and she made thick slices of the bread and slathered them with the butter and honey. Each kid also got a hunk of waxy honeycomb to chew on.

My face and ears were hot, my brain was buzzing and I could barely hear anyone around me. A plate of bread and honey was passed to me and I said in a grumbling tone, "No, thanks. I already have some in my lunch box," and blindly handed it to the girl on my right. When I had the courage to let my eyes leave the blurry desk again for a moment, I slowly glanced around and noticed my classmates eating their bread and laughing.

"At least it will be over soon," I told myself. I surrendered to being a puddle on the floor and accepted that I would never, ever be considered normal in my school.

Then there was a flurry of movement. The kids all started flocking toward my mother, asking for seconds and wanting to touch and put on the beekeeping outfit. She continued to smile and greeted each child's request with the amazing patience she possessed. This went on for what seemed hours to me. Finally, after all the bread was eaten and supplies were put back in the basket, Mom winked at me and blew me a kiss, picked up the head of her beekeeping outfit and her formerly smoking canister and left as conspicuously as she'd arrived.

By the time Mom left the classroom I was emotionally exhausted. I made it through the rest of the day in one big haze and probably learned nothing. I was unsettled about the whole affair and was biding my time till I could get home and tell my mother exactly how she'd ruined any hope I had for a

social life. As I packed my backpack and started walking toward the line to get on the school bus, I was followed and beckoned by one of the coolest and meanest girls in class.

"Here it comes," I thought to myself. But inside I was shored up and sort of numb from the humiliation of the day so I turned boldly to face her, ready for the ridicule.

"That was the best bread I've ever tasted in my life," she said. And others jumped in saying, "You have the nicest mother!"

I stood rattled and dazed, unable to process it all. I got on the bus and sat close to a window and looked outside the whole way home. When I got off the bus and went in the house I was greeted by an ebullient mother, pleased with herself beyond words. I did not reprimand her, as was my plan. I just said in a low voice, "I wish you'd told me what you were planning."

After that day there were many other incidents that separated my world from my classmates' but eventually a balance was struck. Just as I'd craved being lost in the pre-packaged, sugary, cable-filled worlds of their homes, I learned that many kids yearned to be closer to the organic, natural world I lived in. I would hide out and play Pac-Man and Pong on their video games and they would come to our farm to shuck corn, sing by a bonfire and ride horses.

As an adult, I've now had the opportunity to try on several different ways of living. I see distinct lines in the types of lives I've had and look at them as chapters. I've been conventional and tried to keep pace in the rat race. I've worked in high-end restaurants with huge budgets and equally enormous pressures and had the chance to help amazing chefs create menus from the most exotic ingredients and throw parties for celebrity clients.

When I live and work in those worlds for too long I tend to become disconnected from myself and my love of food. That's when I realize it's time to get back to nature, back to the simplicity of good ingredients and the sensual delights the natural world offers. I stick my hands in some dirt and pull up some weeds, hike with my dog or go to a farmers' market.

I am now eternally grateful for the creative, zany background my parents offered me. They taught me many important lessons about life but perhaps none more so than two simple concepts: to appreciate the natural world and have great fun being creative with it and to take wildly unexpected moments and relish them. You never know how your life could be enhanced by someone in a beekeeper's outfit!

DK Crawford is a restaurant critic, freelance writer and photographer originally from the bayoucountry of southern Louisiana where she wrote for multiple publications. She is deeply passionate about all things food related, her dog Noop, southern fiction and her wildly wonderful family. She believes she could solve many of the world's problems if only she could feed everyone some of her homemade chicken soup. She is a longtime member of Slow Food and the Southern Foodways Alliance. She recently moved to Ventura, CA after living in Ojai for the past 6 years. See her most recent work in the VC Reporter or online at <http://thefoodsavant.blogspot.com>.

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