

On Being From the Dirty South, While not Considering Myself a Redneck

by Angela Kubinec

Southern Legitimacy (at least in the Dirty part of the South) is based upon familial hardship, tragedy, insanity and cruel or incomprehensible behavior - the more Faulknerian, the better. So here goes....

On my mother's side:

She chopped tobacco for her great granddaddy when she was a child, started smoking when she was six, and did not find it upsetting to see me smoke when I was thirteen. Tobacco was the thing that kept people alive in those days. This great granddaddy had a house with chinks in the floor where snakes used to crawl in. It is family legend that he worked his first two wives to death.

Her mother's baby sister was killed when the laundry tub boiling in the yard tipped over and scalded her to death.

Aunt Deborah (pronounced de-BOR-rah) came home the night of her honeymoon and never left the house again. The reason given to me was that she could not withstand the duties of a wife. She taught my mother and her siblings how to play cards on her bedroom floor, where it was dim, as the drapes were always closed. Rubbing off warts with a chicken bone was her superpower, but it could only be performed during a full moon. My mother insists that Deborah's ghost used to pause and sit at the foot of her bed each night before she went to sleep. When I asked if she were frightened, my mother was offended. "Of course not," she puffed, "Deb was just checkin' on me."

Sunday afternoons were set aside for me to sit at my grandmother's feet and listen to Puccini. She was trying to give me "some culture". We were both miserable. For a special treat I was allowed to give her a pedicure as she worked cryptograms. The only television program I was ever allowed to watch in her home was "Sing Along With Mitch". Her final words to me were, "What are *you* doing here?"

Uncle Garman was a career Navy man, and as he travelled the world, he brought me dolls from every country. They were always dressed in native costume with full skirts. When I expressed appreciation as an adult, he laughed, and told me he only bought them to hide liquor so he could smuggle it onto the ship. One night he got drunk and was lighting firecrackers with his cigarette in our back yard. He got mixed up and tossed the cigarette in the yard and put the firecracker in his mouth. I should have laughed, but was too young to know the whole story.

In broad daylight on Main Street, my Aunt Mattie loudly threatened to kill her best friend's husband for being abusive. Then she got her jaw broken by said man. He went to jail. She was mildly disfigured. The friend was never beaten again.

On my daddy's side:

Phlebitis developed on the floor of a textile mill disabled his mother. When the mill went belly up, she was left with none of the money she had paid into her pension.

My daddy's first job was behind a mule. His second job was being in an airplane crash during the Korean War and busting his head open. That brain injury was not what caused him to be a mean drunk. He was always a mean drunk and once broke the ribs of the Darlington County Sherriff while resisting arrest over a pinball machine that would not pay out. For a time he was a bootlegger because some counties in North Carolina were dry. He also picked up poor folks on Election Day and bought their votes for a crooked politician with pints of whiskey.

Daddy used to buy Leica cameras at the PX while in Korea and sell them on the black market. Some of the money he used to buy my

grandmother her first set of china. The rest of the black market money he sent home for his mother to save. During this time, his father was having an affair with a bank teller. She helped my grandfather steal all my daddy's savings to cover my grandfather's gambling debt.

By using a college scholarship to learn French, Daddy's sister moved to Okinawa to teach the children of servicemen. Okinawa is as far away from Timmonsville, South Carolina as you can get while staying in the Northern Hemisphere and remaining on safe and friendly territory.

Daddy and Uncle Jess, along with a "passel of other young 'uns" used to skinny dip in the mud at Lake Swamp. Everyone was on duty and cried, "Here come a snake!" as needed. All jumped out to let the snake pass, then they would jump back in.

As a practical joke on his wife, Daddy's grandfather once put a rattlesnake in the trunk of his car and told her he had a gift out there for her. He wedded her by picking her out of a yard on a dirt road in a wagon. She was twelve and playing with her siblings. As the story goes, the man asked her daddy if she was bleeding yet. Apparently her daddy was relieved to have one less mouth to feed and no potential grandbabies under his roof. Daddy's grandfather was an evil man, and was run out of the state by the Klan. It is hard for you, dear reader, to imagine someone being too evil for the Klan, but the whole story is just too big.

Robert (my daddy's best friend) and my daddy called Robert's father in the wee hours one morning to tell him they had drained the oil out of the car and needed to get picked up. When asked where they were, they replied they were upside down in a cornfield. After leaving school in the seventh grade, Robert went on to work on a WPA bridge which I drive over at least once a week. No one in the South is in a hurry to replace anything.

Jackie, Daddy's cousin, used to receive driving instructions from God. Uncle O'Dell spent his life in the State Mental Hospital. Aunt Jett lost her mind, too, and dragged all the furniture out of the house

and set it on fire — the furniture, not the house — although either is equally believable.

Attitudes, beliefs and personal experience also form one's legitimacy as a child of the Dirty South. Here are a few of mine...

It is perfectly okay to shoot wild animals and eat some of them. I have done so.

I once received a Smith and Wesson revolver for an anniversary gift. I have carried it concealed without a permit. It was taken away from me by authority figures due to my "condition".

Everyone needs a yard dog. Everyone needs a yard.

Biscuits are the spiritual equivalent of manna, and must be patted out by hand from a special bowl used only for that purpose.

I was baptized by immersion.

My childhood home was a twelve by sixty foot trailer with a hole chopped in the wall to accommodate an air conditioner. The entire structure was badly wired and my mother was nearly electrocuted at the stove. "Gypsies" used to camp at the trailer park during their annual pass through. When they came, my Daddy chained my bicycle and I was not allowed to play outside.

I bought a shabby house because it has three sturdy porches. The porch is the sacristy of the home.

My cousin Ricky was in love with me when we were children, and when he grabbed and kissed me, everyone thought it was cute. It kind of was.

My fifth grade teacher told us she would protect us from the niggers (she did not say "colored") who had recently been forced into our school by the Supreme Court. Then we all said the Lord's Prayer. Later we memorized the Gettysburg Address. I still cannot express the irony.

I was nearly crushed by a pickup truck when my foot slipped from the bumper as we were mudding downhill.

The first time I got drunk I was thirteen. I stopped when I was thirty-three. At no time was I ever confronted by a family member; this is not strange behavior in my family. Then I started again. Then

I stopped and started again. I think I stopped and started one more time, but I cannot remember. Right now I'm stopped.

My ancestral graveyard is in the middle of a hunt club.

I got engaged on my third date.

Okra is the best vegetable ever. Oysters are the best seafood ever. Slime is good, and anyone who wants to argue about it is itching for a fight.

The best part of a fried chicken is the liver.

I am proud of every word in this piece, and swear to its truth.

