

The Chapter Where I Meet the In-laws - and a couple of Outlaws

Two years into our marriage it was time to meet the in-laws. I had already met Greg's mother Beulah as she had come for an extended visit between husband number three and husband number four. Beulah was young - only 16 years older than Greg, vivacious and flirtatious in her mini skirts and a Veronica Lake hair style colored a shade of red that had no basis in the natural world. When I saw her again she had completely reinvented herself; now a grey haired plump matron happily married to Ron, husband number four. They lived in a trailer house in Nixa, Missouri. Beulah was an excellent cook with a penchant for hot spicy food; her chili alone made the temperature in the trailer rise several degrees. She later admitted that her taste buds had packed it in years ago.

Over the next few weeks I met the rest of the family. There was Greg's grandmother, Grandma Wilkerson and her second husband Grandpa Ross. Grandma Wilkerson had married her first husband at the age of 14 which was not unusual in a state where the legal age for marriage was twelve. Grandma and Ross also lived in a trailer house, but further out of town. Grandma was big on crocheting - toilet roll covers, dolls, cushions, lampshades; every piece of furniture was covered with crocheted dollies or throws. Southern cooking was her speciality which meant that everything was cooked in bacon grease and most meals featured collard greens, potatoes, string beans and fried chicken. Breakfast was bacon and eggs, biscuits in gravy and grits. I believe her first husband had died of cholesterol overload.

Nearby was Greg's uncle, Jack Dean and his wife Faye, who also lived in a trailer. Jack Dean was a chain smoker and an acknowledged alcoholic. Their trailer was decorated with animal heads on all the walls -- including bear and elk as well as other smaller mammals and the lighted display case contained his prized beer can collection. Faye was Jack Dean's second wife as his first wife had met her end when she opened her car door during an argument -- as Jack Dean was driving 70 miles an hour down the highway. Aunt Charlotte (Beulah's sister) was also keen on hunting, in her case it was "bars". She and her husband would go camping and sit in a tree for hours waiting for a "bar" whose head would then decorate Jack Dean's walls.

Charlotte had two daughters - Tracy and Cathy: Tracy was a very precocious teenager; on one weekend in June she graduated high school, had a baby and got married - in that order, thus saving her parents a ton of money on announcement cards. Their other daughter Cathy was only spoken about in whispers as she had shot a lesbian rival in a

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jealous rage. Although the incident was hushed up, this was considered a major faux pas even by their rather liberal standards of behavior.

If these were the city folk I could hardly wait to meet the relatives who lived in the country. First stop was Greg's brother, Jerry Dean and his family. They lived on a mountain in southern Missouri. Their farm was so far back in the woods they had no neighbors, but plenty of livestock who lived in a closer proximity with the family than I was comfortable with. The guest bedroom was an outbuilding used to store farm equipment and animal feed. The patter of very tiny feet kept me awake most of our first night there. Jerry Dean's father, Orden, (issue of Beulah and husband number two) and stepmother lived even further from civilization and were rumored to have a functioning moonshine whiskey still. Unfortunately, I never had the pleasure. Then there was Greg's and Jerry Dean's brother Mickey who was a self-ordained minister of a Pentecostal Church. Attendance at a service required a great deal of stamina as the sermon always ended in an extended invitation to come to the altar accompanied by 101 verses of the hymn, *Just As I Am*. This allowed members of the family to discuss, under the cover of the music, details for the ice cream social to follow.

The first summer in Missouri I felt much as Margaret Mead must have when she first went to the South Pacific to study the natives. I'm not sure what they made of me, but they must have been truly puzzled by Greg whose interests were so different from those of his "kinfolk". By any definition most of them were "rednecks" with their casual racism and non-PC humor. Country and Western music formed the backdrop to their lives. As the old joke goes:

What happens if you play country music backwards?

Your wife returns to you, your dog comes back to life, and you get out of prison.

Tammy Wynette sang of D.I.V.O.R.C.E, but she also "Stood By Her Man". These songs spoke not just about their many hardships, but also their humor, love of family, and their faith - Country artist, Bobby Bare said it best:

Drop Kick Me, Jesus, Through The Goalposts Of Life.