

Memories of a Redneck-Hillbilly Family

By: Amy Click

A Thesis Approved for the Department of English

At the University of Central Oklahoma

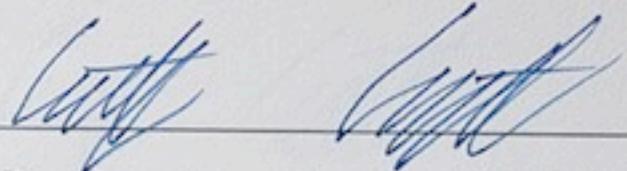
2018

Memories of a Redneck-Hillbilly Family

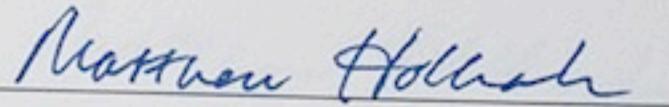
By: Amy Click

A Thesis Approved for the Department of English

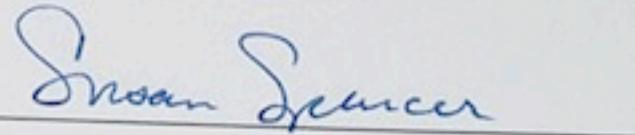
19 April 2018



Dr. Courtney Craggett (Chair)



Dr. Matthew Hollrah



Dr. Susan Spencer

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to acknowledge my very first writing teacher, Adam Davies, who made me read *Naked* by David Sardis, whose book inspired me to write a similar anecdotal tale about my own family. I want to thank him for his support and encouragement. Without his faith in this tale, it surely would not have been written. I would also like to thank Dr. Courtney Craggett, my thesis advisor, who taught me so much about creative nonfiction and helped me fashion this story into a coherent document. Without her help, I am sure this story would be so much less. Thank you, Dr. Hollrah, for giving me such an incredible model for a teacher of writing. You never failed to answer my many questions, offer advice, or make me feel worthy. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Spencer for her willingness to always help me. I feel very fortunate to have so many amazing teachers at the University of Central Oklahoma.

Part 1: Origins

Chapter 1: What It Means

I remember the one and only time I was shot by my family's good time. My older brother Jason and our cousin, Junior, were killing time one summer when I was eleven or so by shooting one another with a BB gun. Somehow, I got shot in the butt. I can't say whether or not the adults knew they were doing this or if this was an act of rebellion done in secret. Of course, when it's done in the front yard for anyone to see, it can't be *too* secret. This type of "fun" is not anything that I would've ever considered doing, so before I was a teenager, I knew that I was different from the rest of my family.

How does one become a member of a redneck hillbilly family? Well, in my case, you are born in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky, home of hollers, coal mines, and hillbillies and raised in Oklahoma, proud host of many a redneck. My family has been a part of the hillbilly tradition since the eighteen hundreds. My mother briefly escaped by being born in Michigan, but she was raised in the mountains. Therefore, she upheld the hillbilly ways. Although she was raised by teachers and does not have the thick accent of mountain folk, I have cousins who do. My father was born in Kentucky like all the Clicks from the past several generations. However, he spent most of his childhood in Willard, Ohio. That means he, too, does not have the thick accent of many of our relatives. The Appalachian accent is unlike any other in America. Coal country people speak in a way not even Hollywood has managed to capture completely. Since I moved to central Oklahoma when I was four, I never accrued the hillbilly way of speaking.

Although I didn't inherit the thick accent, I did have some type of accent because I spent most of my childhood and teenage years in Oklahoma being corrected by friends and teachers. In first grade, I was in speech, working on my R's. My mother, though, had a very clear interpretation of the school's judgement.

“They’re just prejudiced against mountain people ‘cause you speak with an accent!” she insisted, deeply offended by the invitation to speech class.

I, of, course, didn’t believe her since I didn’t think I had an accent. Sure, there were some words I couldn’t say like everyone else: folder, Colorado, and royal came to mind. However, there were some things I was taught wrong. My dad always refers to the sink as a zink. No matter how many times I have told him it has no z in it, that is still what he calls it. The refrigerator was called a fridge-i-dair. Unfortunately, I was thirteen before I realized that wasps were not called waspers. I was even older before I knew an afghan was not called an affergan. Of course, I was teased a bit because I was in honors English class surrounded by very smart classmates. Although an A student, I couldn’t speak the way they could. Kids are not very tolerant of that sort of thing, and I was often made fun of and corrected. It might be a bit ironic that I grew up to be an English teacher, constantly correcting others.

The funny thing about my family, my father, especially, is that once we moved to Oklahoma, hillbilly ways became intermixed with redneck tradition popular in men of the South. At times, it is hard to distinguish between what is redneck and what is hillbilly. I know most of the country incorrectly thinks they are the same thing. Many think they are both ways of insulting and belittling white people, while some think of both words as a way to distinguish white trash. However, hillbillies have a rich heritage and culture that they do not consider embarrassing. The word hillbilly is not an insult to hillbillies just like the word redneck doesn’t really insult most real rednecks. There is an acknowledgement without shame that there really *are* hillbillies like the show *Justified* depicts. Eastern Kentucky *is* very lawless in many aspects. If you call 911, it can take forty-five minutes to two hours before the police arrives. I witnessed this myself as an adult visiting family. Marijuana plants are so plentiful and easily disguised in

the greenery that the ATF normally just burns them, and arrests are rarely made. This means morality is often a cloudy subject in the mountains.

My great-uncle Mark was a teenager when his dad was killed in front of him in a blood feud similar to the notorious Hatfields and McCoys. It was an axe that did him in—a bloody and gory death. He told me once when I was a teenager that he had seen at least one relative killed with a gun. Although a pacifist where guns are concerned, he still had no trouble breaking certain laws. For instance, he could give you the recipe for making moonshine. My parents speak fondly of growing up in Floyd County (a county less than an hour from West Virginia) that was a dry county until the late 70s. Bootleggers would sell moonshine and other alcohols on top of Buckingham Mountain, a dangerous mountain near my birthplace. I grew up listening to stories of deaths and near-deaths due to the perilous journeys up that mountain. Once, a school bus full of children and a driver drove off it during inclement weather. Tragically, almost all were killed. Many similar horrific tragedies have occurred since then. Now if there is even a threat of inclement weather, school is canceled. Although making up snow days until the end of June can be frustrating, it's better than risking the lives of children. My Aunt Linda told me once that she drove off Buckingham Mountain with her two oldest children when they were very young. Fortunately, she hit a tree early on, and none of them were seriously injured. Today, though, drivers in Eastern Kentucky can avoid the risk entirely by taking new highways that have opened up.

There are certain things that are distinctly hillbilly characteristics. As a group, they are distrusting and suspicious of law enforcement. Since it takes so long for them to arrive on scene and ever be of aid, that is not too surprising. Another distinction is that you won't find many social drinkers in the mountains. Most hillbillies are either alcoholics or abstain entirely,

wanting no part of the "demon" rum. I have one cousin that won't eat at restaurants if alcohol is served there. Sadly, drug abuse is rampant in the mountains. The abundance of vegetation makes it incredibly easy for marijuana growers. What began with marijuana grew to prescription drug abuse. According to my youngest brother, Joey, nearly every friend he had from Kentucky as a teen from age twelve to eighteen has died of a drug overdose. My mother told me last year that they have begun finally to crack down on doctors writing prescription drugs. Unfortunately, this means that many pill addicts have turned to heroin, which is suddenly cheap and in abundance in Eastern Kentucky. It is a disturbing trend that shows no end in sight. This adds to the depressed air that permeates the mountains. When President Obama put restriction on coal production, electric bills soared to over \$400. Poverty and the constant battle to survive has marked the hillbilly people. This marking, though, has made them as tough as the coal they mine.

For Hillbillies, doctors are not easily trusted. My Uncle Mark, highly educated with a master's degree in English from the University of Kentucky, distrusted doctors and considered them a greedy, unsavory group of people. Only his life-long doctor did he trust even a little. Uncle Mark lived to the ripe old age of ninety-five rarely going to the doctor for anything. When he was ill at age ninety with a bleeding ulcer, my aunt had to guilt him with tears and begging to get him to the doctor. This was not an isolated event in the family. My great Uncle Victor hadn't been to a doctor in the ten years before he died. Appalachian men are very private about their bodies. They don't wear shorts, don't take their shoes off in front of people, and they don't go to the doctor because they don't want to answer questions about their body or have their private "parts" touched.

Hillbillies are a stubborn group. My youngest sister Sherry has been without a hip joint for over a decade. My parents' dire warnings of how doomed she is if she gets a hip replacement have kept her in pain and limping all her adult life. It is maddening to witness the sheer pigheadedness of relatives when it comes to medical issues. For example, being a diabetic means you take a shot of insulin before eating whatever you want without much constraint. Heeding the advice of medical professions is rare for many of my relatives. Of course, as I already mentioned, there are those growing numbers of pill addicts in the mountains who think a pill will cure every ill, which is now a source of a new problem as the opiate abuse that is rampant across the nation has strong roots in many families in coal country. My Aunt Thelma tells me she recalls being given more than one necessary pill growing up that she now is convinced was not necessary at all.

We moved to Oklahoma because there are not any jobs or economic development in Eastern Kentucky outside of the coal mines. My dad was a tool and die maker by trade. His brother-in-law had family in Oklahoma, so we came here. After he easily obtained a job, we stayed. My dad has mostly a negative opinion of Eastern Kentucky due to the drugs and lawlessness. My mother, though, grew up in the mountains and has kept a deep, abiding love for them. When my parents divorced in 2003, she moved back to the mountains and has been there for the past fifteen years.

Kentucky is a state of great beauty. The bigger cities like Louisville and Lexington have rolling hills and large historic plantation houses. One of my cousins is campus police officer at the University of Kentucky, and I have spent quite a bit of time in Lexington, touring. Lexington and Louisville are rich in Southern history even though Kentucky was the only slave state to be a part of the Union. The main reason for that is that the other half of Kentucky—the half my

family is from—is where the mountain and coal mines reside. They had no slaves and few black Americans. Today, the racial make-up hasn't really changed. Minorities live in the cities, and hillbillies are almost exclusively white with some Native American blood mixed in.

People don't live on top of the mountains in Kentucky; they live *in* the mountains. They use dynamite to level areas for a home. They surrounded themselves with trees and grass so green in the summer that it looks blue—a mountain of foliage as far as the eyes can see. Then in the winter the green dies away, and the trees become barren and heartbroken as they stand naked in the sun. Sometimes, though, they will be covered in a blanket of white—a thing of beauty that is deadly to drivers.

Oklahoma is vastly different. Although we have some hills in the southeastern part of our state, the central area where we live is considered the heart of the plains. We showcase open fields as far as the eyes can see. I never realized how much growing up with the vast openness we have in central Oklahoma was a part of me until I moved to eastern Kentucky for a few months in 2002. I felt hemmed in by the mountains. After a while, the beauty seemed oppressive because I felt trapped by the immensity of their looming presence. For mountain folks like my mother, however, the mountains are a source of comfort and protection—a safe haven.

Kentucky does not have the extreme weather that Oklahoma has, but they do have floods. When it rains, it is a steady waterfall, and then the sun comes out. However, if it rains even for short periods for days, the water drains down the mountains, overflowing the creek beds and rivers. I was born in the great flood of '77—as my father called it. I spent time in Kentucky during my early twenties during Kentucky's flood days, and it is a scary sight. Unlike Oklahoma, Kentucky has seasons. The grass doesn't go from green to brown like many years in Oklahoma. There you see all the beautiful colors of fall. Here in Oklahoma, we see the fall every few years.

My dad has loved Oklahoma, though, from the beginning. He loves the people, the crazy weather—everything. In the summer, he gets the farmer tan and has an actual red neck, adding credence to my redneck label of him. As a large man at six feet three inches tall and over two hundred pounds, his wardrobe of choice is a pocket t-shirt with jeans that are too loose and held up with a belt even as he is always pulling them up. Too many times in my life have I seen his pale butt crack. “Crack kills, Dad! Pull up those pants!” is a family joke.

Rednecks, as a rule, are more gregarious as a group than hillbillies. Hillbillies tend to stick to their own—their own places, peoples, and familiar things. A redneck rarely meets a stranger and will normally strike up conversation with just about anyone. That is my father’s natural personality, so it is not too surprising that he felt at one with the rednecks in Oklahoma.

There are certain things only a true redneck will do. I have known other rednecks that weren’t related to me, so I have concluded that it is true judgment. I went to college with a guy name Clint who was a redneck. My label was proven correct after a year or so of knowing him. He drove a small car that was similar to a Geo. He decided that he wanted a sunroof on his car, so, he literally cut a large square in the top of his car, creating a sunroof. When it rained, he put a piece of plywood fitted to cover the hole. He was quite proud of it—as only a redneck would be. In my experience, pride in patchwork inventions is a trait found in redneck, which made Clint a true redneck.

Rednecks are often extremely talented at mechanical things and full of ingenuity. My dad has proven himself to be similar in multiple ways. He will say he is flat broke and yet have money to buy any tool or gadget that he desires. His ability to fix and make things is endless. When I was in high school, he would do repairs on my car by having me go to the library and get the car manual on it. Today, he will watch a *YouTube* video to learn how to fix things. A few

years ago, he took wood from an abandoned trailer on his land and made a shop for himself. All he had to buy was nails and a window. Yet he thought it was clever to use a wheelbarrow for a swimming pool when my niece Emily was two. When she was three, he gave her an upgrade. He dragged the bathtub down from the old trailer and filled it with water. In fact, he took pictures and proudly posted his creation on Facebook. That is why I call him a redneck.

Other proof of my father's redneck ways is the fact that he drove his truck around with the side mirror held together by duct tape for a few years. After I made fun of him for it for a long time, he finally welded the window to the frame. It took him no time at all. He did not need help, nor did he have to pay someone. It simply took him *years* to prioritize the job. A true redneck is often incredibly talented at a great number of things. The humor, though, can often be found in the ways they choose to spend their time and money. About four or five years ago, he used a rope to hold up his pants instead of a belt—his old belt had broken. When I teased him over this and told him to go buy a belt, he claimed he couldn't afford a new belt.

"They're *seven* dollars at Wal-Mart, Dad!" I said. "You spent thirty on the TV antenna you just bought!"

That was a normal argument with my dad. His hillbilly stubbornness shows through in arguments like this. When I argue too much with him about something I consider idiotic (I spent a lot of my early years arguing with my dad), my dad laughs and says, "It's cause you're a feminist!" That is his actual response when I insist on a point of view that is different from his. He happily concedes to his chauvinist label that I gave him long ago. The reason, of course, for my contrariness is because I am a feminist (his words).

My response: "Jesus was a feminist, too! Mary Magdalene gave the first sermon of His resurrection!" I boasted. He just laughed and shook his head dismissively. He has learned not to

engage me when it comes to Bible knowledge. Over the years, I had to learn much Bible trivia in order to combat racist or chauvinistic habits from my father. Luckily, I am happy to report my diligence paid off. My dad has come a long way in both areas thanks to my tenacity.

As I think of my childhood and early adult years, I can see the imprint of both traditions on my development and thinking even as I struggle with a growing sense of isolation in my family. Trying to unravel the links that bind me to my family and my heritage is what compelled me to write this memoir. I do not want to just explore who I am, but who I am through the two different traditions that come from the hillbilly and redneck cultural my family is wrapped in. My childhood was chaotic and drama-filled due to the large size of my immediate family. As the oldest daughter, I was given much responsibility from an early age. Growing up, I had my parents and various aunts and uncles that helped forge my identity. This is a review of each character that surrounded me growing up. Which traditions are stronger in me, hillbilly or redneck? Does it even matter?

Chapter 2: Favorite Family Pastimes

A test of manliness that engaged my brothers and male cousins over the years was putting their hands over the barrel of a BB gun. The gun would not be loaded, but the force of the air still stung. The guys would show their prowess by being able to withstand the slight pain of the air blast. My baby brother, Joey, was around twelve when he watched our brother Timmy, who was eight years his senior, do it three or four times without flinching. He insisted on having a turn to show how tough he was.

Unfortunately for him, a random BB was in the chamber, and it ended up in his hand. Surgery and nerve damage were the result of this particular pastime in Joey's case. This is the exact type of thing that my siblings did that totally mystified me. My father did *not* do things like that or talk about glory childhood days, so I'm not sure why my siblings are so daring and foolish. Surprisingly, guns were *not* banned after that incident. Trying to take a gun from my family of rednecks and hillbillies is like trying to move a two-ton boulder. It's not going to happen.

I cannot really distinguish what traditions of my family are genuine hillbilly traditions or redneck since there are some things that both enjoy. Hunting and a love of guns seem to be enjoyed by both groups. The casualness of violence seems to be a hillbilly thing, however. For example, my mother's second husband, Steve, who I suspect was a drug dealer, kept a loaded gun by him at all times. When he was drunk, he was known to wave the gun around. Once he even tried to shoot my brother Timmy. Luckily, the bullet hit the wall by his head and not him. Now in a normal family, attempted murder would mean divorce at the very least. Not in my family. With mine, the old maximum, no harm, no foul is not just a cliché—it's a way of life.

“Well, he was drunk,” my mother said defensively. “Timmy’s fine. He’s not even mad about it anymore.”

I am not sure what is worse. That my mother stayed a few more years with this man or that Timmy didn’t think it was that big of deal either. To me, they both exercised poor judgement, and I cannot fathom loving, liking, or even tolerating a man like Steve. My mother and I are so different. When I think of Steve and her choice to be with someone like him, I am reminded strongly how I stand apart—even from my own mother.

Nevertheless, it has been my experience that my family gets over a lot of things that would destroy normal relationships. Is this a hillbilly characteristic or a redneck one? Honestly, I am unsure. My Aunt Thelma says that hillbillies try to hide any violence, pretend it never happened, and in all ways keep the family's secret. I know that when my Uncle Mark's son Marky's, wife Caroline heard that I was writing about Uncle Mark's daddy dying in the blood feud, her response was sharp.

"You're not writing that in your book!" she rebuked, stunning me. I had never heard her raise her voice in my entire life. I explained that I wanted to get the details right because I remembered him telling me that his dad was shot, but our cousin Penny said that her grandpa was killed by a pitch-axe. I calmly assured her that I wasn't trying to paint him in a bad light—the man was practically a saint in my mind. Fortunately, Marky didn't mind and was happy to share what he knew with me. Caroline's response, though, demonstrated that, in some ways, my immediate family was often a sharp contrast to our hillbilly cousins. Keeping secrets from my siblings or them from me is an impossibility. We share everything—too much really. In fact, I am often telling my youngest sister Sherry that I do not want to know whatever Kelly or Timmy is up to. Ignorance can really be bliss when it comes to some things.

For both groups, however, a beer and a good time washes away a multitude of sins.

This means hunting is a favorite past time of both groups. Growing up, my dad, his friends, and uncles all loved deer hunting. Some of my earliest memories involve the bloody carcass of a draining deer. No love of Bambi in our family. Hunting was mostly a male endeavor. Once, I complained of the unfairness of that fact, so my dad took me rabbit hunting with him. I was around eleven or twelve; however, I was not given a gun. No rabbits were brave enough to face our bullets. Surprisingly, I never enjoyed shooting a gun because the noise always made me jump, so my aim was always off. Although I didn't get a chance to pull the trigger during my one and only hunting trip, I was allowed to shoot a gun at various other occasions. BB guns were owned by every male relative I had growing up. However, shotguns are no fun to shoot because I did not enjoy the pain of the recoil. For me, then, hunting wasn't very exciting. It was cold and boring because I wasn't allowed to talk. All my gun shooting occurred under the age of sixteen. The men can have that particular sport.

Even though I never had a gift for shooting, I can remember a few women in my family who fared better. My sister Kelly was a pretty good shot. A few of my female cousins could shoot what they aimed for. My fraternal grandmother Nanny, a true hillbilly matriarch, actually kept a small pistol in her bra until the day she died. My Aunt Cordy once shot a water moccasin at the lake that I almost stepped on when I was around nine. She pulled out the gun like it was nothing and shot the snake's head right off. Scared me so much that I jumped a foot off the ground. Again, the adult version of me would never consider doing *any* of these things. Although I can understand the appeal of hitting a target with a gun, the loudness and recoil still seem like too much for a female like me to overcome. Why would I want to do it? It's not a

moral stance against gun violence that keeps me away from guns today. It's the belief that I would probably accidentally shoot myself or someone else.

Although I failed at hunting, my dad found me great at helping him with the disgusting tasks associated with hunting. Once, when I was in third or fourth grade, he decided he wanted me to know what a squirrel tasted like. He shot one of the many that lived in our yard. I have very vivid memories of holding the dead animal's little legs while he pulled the skin off it. Yes, it tastes like chicken. Another time, he had me helping him clean up an actual chicken he had butchered. Although I was fifteen or sixteen at that time and thought I had developed a strong stomach after years of his hunting, I will never forget that disgusting experience. Chickens have many more tiny inside pieces than I realized. It looked and smelled rancid. Once again, my job in this butchering was simple—holding the legs. I guess every kid needs a skillset.

Why was I chosen to these tasks when I had an older brother? Mainly, I was chosen because I was better at following direction than my older brother Jason. Dad often told me that I was better at getting a task done than all of the others (my cousins and Jason) put together.

"I can give Amy a task and not worry about it. If I give it to Jason, Nick, or Tommy, it would rarely get done or get done wrong," he said. "I never have to go behind Amy."

Once, I recalled Dad telling mom that the kids (my four younger siblings) would be fine at the house without him and Mom. "There's two adults in the house with them, Madeline," he told my mother since Jason was technically eighteen even though he was still a junior in high school.

"Amy is only thirteen, Joe," she reminded him.

I remember my dad blinking at that reminder and pausing for just a second. "She's practically an adult," he insisted. I was an adult because I had to be—because he treated me like

one. Even as a child, I wasn't allowed to be a child. There was always someone that needed me to take care of them. Of course, I was mostly proud of my dad's faith in me. He would tell my siblings, "Amy's in charge. And Jason." Jason was older, but he was always the afterthought. He was never in charge without me. Of course, I wasn't an adult, and I didn't pay attention to a lot of things an adult would—I ignored chaos until things gotten broken or someone got hurt. This head-in-the-sand mentality comes more from the hillbilly side of my family. Hillbillies traditionally like to be left alone and not bothered—sometimes I am like that. It's a trait I recognize in myself, Jason, and in my father.

It's no surprise, of course, that both hillbillies and rednecks love their guns, and they love hunting. Even though my dad likes to reminisce about coon hunting and his great coon dogs on occasion, I think rednecks might enjoy hunting more than hillbillies. I have found some extreme love of hunting in this state. When I taught middle school in Tecumseh, I had boys that would miss school for a week because their dads were taking them deer hunting. One student proudly bought me some very tasty deer jerky when he returned. Although I grew up around it, I still am mystified about the appeal of hunting. Hillbillies were so poor for generations that hunting was a real means of survival. It wasn't a sport. During the depression, if you didn't hunt, you starved. Rednecks, though, take genuine pleasure out of the entire experience. Luckily, my dad enjoyed the comradery of it more than the actual hunting, so as friends and family moved away or died, his desire to hunt waned. That means for the past two decades, my family has been dead animal free outside of my dad's ongoing war on the possums that kill his chickens.

A few years ago, when my niece Emily was nearly four, I came to visit them (she and Joey were living with my dad at the time).

“Papa shot a possum, Amy! I seen it!” she excitedly said.

“What?” I asked. I went to find my dad, and he was outside fiddling with the tractor.

“Dad, did you shoot a possum in front of Emily?”

“She was there,” he said with a shrug.

I turned to her dad, Joey. “Joey, she is not even *four years old!* You guys can’t be shooting animals in front of her! She doesn’t need to see that!” I scolded them.

Dad, though, was unashamed. A week later, he proudly showed me the animal’s skull that he had decoratively painted as an art project for Emily.

“I’m going to sell in on E-bay,” he announced.

“Who would buy a painted dead animal head?” I asked in disdain.

“Lots of people. I saw it first on there. It’s what gave me the idea. Other people do this,” my dad informed me.

“That’s disgusting!” I declared. He just grinned, unconcerned. Although I am more like my dad than my mom in my ways, it is things like this that puzzle me. A man that is almost always logical and reasonable gets ideas like this that I find utterly confounding.

Another favorite pastime for rednecks is camping. Camping is a step removed from hunting. It is another redneck tradition that I cannot say I ever enjoyed. Sleeping on the ground is never fun, although roasting marshmallows and telling stories is fun. Fishing is boring because it requires silence, a feat most of the women in my family find nearly impossible. However, my least favorite part about camping stems from one truly horrific experience when I was in the sixth grade. We went camping with my cousins in Norman at Lake Thunderbird. No one, of course, remembered to bring toilet paper. My cousin, Trenette, suggested I use a leaf. Unbeknownst to me, the leaf was poison ivy. Which is worse? Getting poison ivy on your private parts or being twelve and having your male cousin go to school the next day and tell the

entire school bus about your misfortune? Lucky for me, I got to experience both those events. Of course, it got better when the biggest loudmouth in my grade rode my bus and made sure he told everyone in my sixth-grade class about my bad luck.

No, camping was *not* my favorite redneck pastime.

Besides shooting guns and going camping, my family occupied our time with games. Most games in our family involved violence of some kind. In fact, some of my best childhood memories stem from a few of these games. Football was played frequently when I was growing up. My status as a female gave me a measure of protection in my family. Mother was always scolding my dad for having me do things that might hurt my womb. This is an actual fear my mother had when I was growing up. I am unsure if this is hillbilly mythology or if my mother was just utterly ridiculous. [When I read a draft of this story to my mother, she laughed at this point and informed me that this was a common expression she heard growing up. Females were taught to be wary of hurting their womb with too much physical activity]. Either way, I grew up with the irrational fear of lifting too many heavy things and unable to bear children. Somehow, football playing was allowed, but my womb had to be protected. That meant that I was permitted to tackle my older brother Jason and male cousins, but they could not tackle me. Although that was mostly enforced, I often found myself on the bottom of a dog pile since I was good at catching the ball. However, I enjoyed the distinction of being the only female playing with the boys.

Aunt Thelma told me that when she was growing up, if a person didn't have a ball to throw, it was perfectly acceptable to throw rocks. Growing up in my house, rock or ball throwing only got windows broken in our house and the kid whipped or switched.

Another violent game we played with adults was called Hide-the-Belt. I am not sure if it was a game my dad's younger brother Pokey made up or if it was part of their childhood. When I asked my dad if he or his brother made it up, he said that he couldn't remember. The game was just something everyone played when he was a kid. In my childhood, it was one of the few games adults would initiate. Pokey would take off his belt and hide it first. The front porch was always base. If you found it, you would start swinging it at whoever was around, trying to hit them with it. The only restriction was no face shots. If you didn't get hit or were first to base, then it was your turn to hide the belt. Since I wasn't terribly brave, I would hide near the porch and quickly make it back to the safe oasis. When I shared this childhood past time with friends in Chicago, they looked at me in horror, reminding me once again that I was different because my family was different. They don't understand that, for me, this was a cherished childhood memory.

Eventually, that game evolved into another sibling favorite pastime that utterly mystifies me to this day. I would call this an example of a redneck pastime—violence without reason entails much amusement for many rednecks. My siblings often fit this stereotype, and this game is evidence of this. My younger siblings, Timmy and Kelly, loved to play this game. Jason, my older brother, would get them to play an evolution of the Hide-the-Belt game that they referred to as The Switch Game. My favorite cousin, Tommy, was my age and would play this game with them, as would his older brother, Nicky. They would go look for really long and thick “switches” that were only a few inches shy of being considered a club. They would give the switches to the younger kids, Timmy and Kelly. The game was this: The older kids would run and hide while the younger kids would look for them. When they found them, they'd try to hit them with the switch while they evaded. Of course, I found this game to be utterly insane and

mindless—nothing could convince me otherwise. I was around twelve or thirteen when they started this new game. That meant that Jason was seventeen or eighteen, and Nicky was two years younger. This is a game they would play with high enjoyment for *hours*. I think much of the lure was it was one of the few activities the older boys would play with the younger kids. Naturally, I was asked often to participate. Here was my response:

“You want me to chase you through the woods with big sticks with permission to hit you with the sticks if I find you or run while Timmy and Kelly do the same to me?” I asked incredulously.

“Yep!” Jason replied.

“It’s fun, Amy!” Tommy exclaimed.

“You guys are insane!” I informed them and kept reading my book.

This was yet another reminder of how unlike them I was. Pointless violence was never something that appealed to me. Running through the woods wasn't either. My siblings were much more physical than I was. Sherry couldn't physically be as ambulatory as the rest of them, but she was still outside more than I was at her age. I was happy with stories. They could be either in a book, television, or movie form—it didn't matter. Stories allowed me to be other places—to escape my life whenever I wanted to. Mentally, I spent a great deal of time elsewhere. It was the only way I knew of then to cope with how different I was than everyone else around me. I could escape the chaos that often came with a large family. Because I thought deeply about pretty much everything all the time, I was forever seeing pitfalls in choices my siblings and cousins would make. Consequences were *always* weighed whenever anything was brought to my attention or asked of me. Although as an adult I am very decisive, I am rarely impulsive. I think things through—my siblings do not.

The men of both groups have always struck me as being both brave and daring. Their entertainment pursuits often reflect that. A favorite activity is mudding. Some refer to it as off-road driving. I remember doing this with my dad as a child in his big yellow pick-up truck in Oklahoma. The thrill is to drive the truck down river beds to see if you get stuck and power your way through it while mud is slung everywhere. This isn't a particularly dangerous pastime. However, the hillbilly version is. The mountains make the pastime highly dangerous, especially when four wheelers are used in this endeavor. Another thrill that goes with this is seeing how steep a mountain you can drive your vehicle up before it flips. Yet the danger is pursued even as teenagers die from this activity all the time. My sister, Sherry, however, says mudding was about the adrenaline high since the lure of danger was too attractive to resist. We did this in Kentucky and Wyoming on more than one occasion. My dad and his yellow pickup truck drove up more than one mountain with me in the cab next to him. I remember one vacation in Wyoming we did that, and then dad stopped to shoot at the dozens of prairie dogs that filled the desert mountains. For me, it was an exciting time to share with my father, and I had implicit trust that he would keep me safe. He always did.

My childhood is full of so many memories like these. As an adult, I treasure many of these memories and experiences. However, I cannot see repeating them as an adult or taking another child into similar circumstances. Sometimes, I think it's a generational gap, but other times, I believe it is proof that I am fundamentally unique in my family. My sense of bravery doesn't extend to daredevil stunts, but I was brave enough to move to Chicago, the third largest city in America, when I didn't know a soul. I had only four hundred dollars to my name and managed to carve out a place for myself. Not needing a person to hold my hand or be with me is something I inherited from my hillbilly blood. Independence is in our nature.

Chapter 3: Deep Roots

As I examine my roots, my family, and my role models, I wonder how does my history affect who I am now? Why am I so different from my siblings? What is the difference between hillbilly and redneck? Why do the differences even matter? What part of my bloodline has a direct effect on my family today? Do our origins really matter? Can we ever escape our history? Is my family as strange as I think they are?

These are the questions that drive me. Although I explained a few tangible differences between redneck and hillbilly, historically, the lines are a bit blurrier. The term hillbilly has been around ever since the Scot-Irish settled in the Appalachian Mountains. This term isn't just because of the geographical setting because it goes back to the Catholic King James II's war with William in the 1600s. The Scot-Irish brought back their traditional music to the mountains since they settled there in the 1700s—at least I know that's not long after my Click family relatives first are recorded living in Floyd County, Kentucky. Hillbilly music, of course, became Bluegrass and eventually evolved thanks to help from many country musical icons like Elvis, Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, Merle Haggard, Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynne, Ricky Skaggs, and the Judd sisters, Naomi and Wynonna—all but Johnny and Willie were from hillbilly states like Kentucky, West Virginia, or Tennessee.

In the late 1800's, the first known instance of "Hillbilly" in print was in "The Railroad Trainmen's Journal." According to the *New York Journal*, there was an 1899 photograph of men and women in West Virginia labeled "Camp Hillbilly" with the definition: "a Hill-Billie is a free and untrammled white citizen of Alabama, who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him." A hundred years later, I would argue that there is still much truth to that definition. However, it's not *all* that a Hillbilly is. My mother's ex, Steve, fits that definition to

a T. One Christmas several years ago, I left the house she shared with him Christmas Eve because I could no longer tolerate exactly how much he fit that definition. He even has the pistol he waves around whenever a person annoys him. When he's drunk, bullets are known to fly.

The term Redneck also originates with the rebellious Scot-Irish. Wiping blood on their necks would symbolize their stance in ancient conflicts. Eventually, the rebels would wear red bandanas around their neck to show what side of the conflict they were on. Both Hillbillies and Rednecks have common roots and the same rebellious spirit. Is it any wonder, then, that the stereotypes still exist today? They are often given to groups of white Americans who refuse to follow the status quo. These rebels know who they are, what they believe, and who they will fight for. They do not apologize for this. This attitude both offends and amuses; it causes many to ridicule or look for a way to silence them for voicing a strong conservatism that is held close.

Silencing a hillbilly isn't very hard since they don't like strangers and rarely share what they think with outsiders. Silencing a redneck, though, is another story entirely. The Robertsons, the family that created *The Duck Dynasty*, are a perfect example of the modern redneck family. They have a clear fundamental Christian point of view that they do not apologize for. Although my dad doesn't have the facial hair (much to my relief), he still fits the Robertsons family's point of view. Sometimes, though, the line between hillbilly and redneck is still a bit blurry. I will look to my family to try and see if I can uncover the distinctions.

Where exactly do I fit in? Am I a hillbilly? Would Redneck Woman be an apt description of me? I think as I describe the relatives that impacted my life, the answer becomes clear. As I attempt to label them, I can figure out how exactly I fit in. My Aunt Thelma told me that some hillbillies are rednecks, but all people in Southern Appalachia are hillbillies regardless of church membership, education level, or lifestyle choices. Hillbillies, she said, are "hide-

bound." That means they don't want to leave their tent or comfort zone. They love their trees, rivers, and creeks, and are reluctant to accept change. The thing, though, that has changed little since the Scot-Irish settled the mountains is the language.

My Aunt Thelma told me that when she was researching British slang, she was surprised to discover how much of the Appalachian slang was exactly like the Brit's or very similar. Here are some things she told me:

She was an adult and living in Lexington, Kentucky before she ever heard the word toilet. In the mountains, it was always called a commode. Until she told me that, I hadn't realized that it was the only thing my dad ever called it. My mother uses both expressions, so it never registered.

Aunt Thelma says that if you ask a hillbilly, "You want to come to dinner tomorrow?" They might reply, "I don't keer (care) to. This does *not* mean "no." In fact, it means yes. Contrariness is even built into their language!

"We say school teacher instead of just teacher. Sometimes it's spelled as a single word—educated or not," she explained to me.

Pitcher and picture are both said like pitcher by all hillbillies, educated or not. Pen and pin are also pronounced the same. Latter and ladder is another one that sound the same. Marvel for marble. I never knew this was a hillbilly thing until my aunt told me this. When I lived in Chicago for several years, my inability to pronounce these words distinctively was the subject of much teasing. I never knew if it was a Southern or hillbilly habit. I just knew that not only could I physically *not* say the words differently, to me, they sounded the same. In fact, even after an English degree, I thought they were homonyms. Suffice to say, I am physically

incapable of saying the words the "correct way." This is one way my hillbilliness shines through.

The final consonant of many words is very soft or completely unheard. This is not just hillbillies who do this. It comes from the Welch, who also sound the "g" softly in most words, and names like Giles get the soft "j" sound. Also, dropping the final g in words like *going*, changing to *gonna* is something that is becoming very Southern, and I hear it in Oklahoma, too.

Here are some "way up the holler sayings" (as my aunt describes it):

Deaf is deef. (My dad always said this one about my hard of hearing brother, so I know she is right).

Chair and cheer are both cheer.

Nekid means naked. Lack is often pronounced like. Paw and Paul are both pronounced with the silent consonant, never hearing the "l" sound. In this last example, I will confess that I normally will pronounce them the hillbilly way unless I make a conscious effort to enunciate the final *l* in Paul.

Of course, there are some hillbilly expressions that make the English teacher in me cringe. "Set a spell. We ain't seen you in a month of Sundees." My Aunt Thelma insists she heard this expression quite a bit growing up. I am happy to report that I have never heard either of my parents vocalize it.

Using the word "right" as an adjective. For example, "That's a *right* long letter." Or "The *right* Reverend Dr. Jones." This isn't considered bad English—just old-fashioned English. Using *them* for *they* and *us* for *we* is common in complex sentences in the mountains.

This is by no means all the differences, but it gives you an idea of why hillbilly culture is, in many ways, more distinct than redneck culture. The dialect is uniquely its own. According to

the *Appalachian* magazine, the Appalachian-English is one of the oldest versions of English spoke in America. They also explain that the predominate theory as to way the dialect has survived through so many generations is because of the isolation of the mountains. Because the Appalachian people rarely venture from their mountains, their way of speaking hasn't been significantly altered in the last few hundred years. Although I personally have American Indian blood in me from my great-grandmother, the Appalachian-English does not have much influence at all from Native American language or culture except for the name Appalachia itself and Tennessee and a few others.

Even if a person moves to another region, the dialect is hard to lose. Strangely enough, you can find some of the Appalachian dialect in multiple Texas locals due to the fact that nearly two centuries ago, sons of Virginia's Appalachian area like Davey Crocket and Sam Houston left the mountains, taking their dialect with them. When a country singer from Texas sounds very much like some from the hillbilly states, don't assume it's an affectation.

I see this as further evidence of their rebellious nature since they consistently refuse to conform to even changes in their dialect.

As I researched the language and history of hillbillies, I found the things that my Aunt Thelma told me about the language to be accurate. However, I did *not* know that some of the expressions were so directly Elizabethan, especially the expression, "I don't *keer* to." Ironically, linguist conclude that much of the language English teachers today would consider "bad English" was actually the exact dialect of the highest-ranking nobles from the England and Scotland parts of Great Britain. If only language was the only thing, that made them so different.

There are many superstitions that exist throughout the Appalachia region that also originate from the Elizabethan influence. For example, when people die, the mirrors and

pictures will be turned to face the wall. My Aunt Thelma told me that she knew many people growing up who practiced that custom. It was believed that the mirror reflected the person's soul, and if a person was looking into the mirror right after a person died, the dead spirit might see them and take their relative with them to the beyond. Hiding the mirrors was a way to prevent this fear from taking place. Another belief that stems from the Elizabethan influence is the fear of birds flying into the house. It was considered a death omen. Aunt Thelma insists that *many* people believed this. Now I understand all these movies and television shows that would make a flock of birds coming inside ominous. This fear made it out of the mountains. It is just one of the many things that mark the hillbilly people as unique.

In our society today, we have been taught to resist labels, to not conform. In fact, many would say that my labeling of my family as redneck or hillbilly is prejudicial or even mean spirited. So why would I do it? Well, I don't think labels are inherently evil or wrong. Labels that are used to limit people are wrong. In contrast, labels that are used to understand can be useful. For instance, if someone says, "I'm just a country girl at heart," those listening know the girl is making a statement about her likes, dislikes, and expectations. For me, trying to figure out why my family is so different from other families I have known in my life is important. Trying to understand why *I* am so different from all five of my siblings is a lifelong goal of mine.

Growing up, I heard and studied the age-old argument of nature versus nurture. Are people born bad or are they raised to be that way? Can we really change or be anything other than that which they were taught? The older I get, the more I understand things about my family and myself. Sometimes, I feel like I understand my siblings so much better than they will ever understand me. Writing this family is my way of working through my various experiences with them. There have been good and bad things, but through it all, there's been an abundance of

laughter. We are a family that enjoys laughing and a good joke more than most. In fact, a well-placed barb or pun is appreciated more by my immediate family than anywhere else. Each member of my family, no matter his or her faults, has the innate ability to laugh at the absurd—even themselves if it's called for.

What might be considered cruel in some families is a source of vast amusement in ours. A few years ago, my dad and I were at Atwoods, and I saw this tiny, ceramic pig—about an inch tall. It was extremely cute. One of us—I can't recall if it was Dad or I—decided that this was a perfect gift for Sherry. I named him Wilbert, and my dad declared that he was Sherry's new boyfriend. Dad texted Sherry and told her he met a guy who liked her. Playing coy, he wouldn't tell her his name.

When we got home, Sherry immediately asked, "So who is this guy? Do I know him? Have I met him?"

"He really likes you," I told her. "I think he's perfect for you."

"His name is Wilbert," Dad said with a grin.

Sherry was puzzled. "I don't know any Wilberts," she said.

Then Dad reached in his pocket and handed her the little pig. "Say hi to Wilbert," he told her. He and I busted into laughter, finding the joke hilarious. Sherry, of course, did not and threw the pig at us.

Occasionally, we *still* talk about Wilbert. Recently, I was in my dad's bathroom and saw him on the top of his chest. Wilbert lives on as does the joke.

Now in a normal family, this would be unkind and met with disapproval. In our family, it was a great way to pass the afternoon. Sherry, of course, didn't find it funny. Just like I didn't find it funny when she convinced me two years ago that she'd accidentally put diesel in my car.

She still laughs about how mad I got, and I still laugh about Wilbert. In our family, a good joke lives on for *years*.

We are a disturbed family at times, but I cannot deny that there are some things about us that mystify me. Figuring out where each of us fits makes it easier to understand why some things work in my family and some things do not. Why am the only one that loves to read and go to school? Why have I had no trouble resisting habit-forming substances while all but one sibling is unable to do this? Are they predisposed to it more than I am? Does birth order matter that much? Is it my education level that protects me? These are things that I am trying to understand as recall my childhood and pick apart each family member that impacted my life as I grew up. Studying and remembering how each impacted me, I hope, will help make it easier to accept why I am often a stranger in my own family, climbing a mountain that no one else sees is there.

Part II: My Family

Chapter 4: Dad

Most would agree that it is the men that make both rednecks and hillbillies so unique. The redneck men, though, have an innate kindness that often escapes the hillbilly men. There is a cruelty and hardness in the men in my family that is hard to acknowledge at times.

My paternal grandpa, Pappy, was a Baptist preacher all my dad's life. Then after my dad was raised, he became Pentecostal. As a child, I worshiped him and saw him as very Christ-like.

"Why did you quit being Baptist, Pappy?" I asked him once.

"Because I met the Holy Ghost," he replied. It was never the more modern Holy Spirit, but Holy Ghost.

When I close my eyes, I can still see him preaching. He didn't pastor anymore, but he would often preach to the family or at whatever church we attended. He was a tall, thin man who always wore long-sleeved buttoned-up dress shirts with slacks. Usually, a black top hat or cowboy hat sat upon his head. Even if he was gardening, he had on his preaching clothes. When he would preach, he'd pace from one end of the stage to the other, his thin chicken legs sticking out as he'd strut back and forth, spit always shooting out of his mouth. In my entire life, I never saw him raise a hand in anger or be unkind or harsh to anyone.

My dad, though, knew a very different man. As a father, Pappy was a harsh and strict disciplinarian.

Dad once shared a story about Pappy that reflected this fact. Pappy started the tradition of "Go cut your own switch."

Several years ago, my dad recounted this tale of Pappy from his childhood. "When we were young, we had these chickens that lived in the barn. The baby chickens kept climbing on things and falling into the water bucket and drowning. They were doing it to themselves. We

tried to tell Dad that, but he didn't believe us," Dad shared. "He took the four of us into the barn. He had a large switch in his hand."

"These chickens aren't getting dead by themselves. Chickens don't commit suicide," he told them. "I want to know which one of you is killing these chickens?" He looked at Dad's older brother, Uncle Sill. Then his eyes fell to Dad, Pokey, and their only sister Beba—she was the baby.

"We didn't do it, Dad. Honest," Dad told him.

"I don't believe you, Joe," Pappy said. "And I'm going to start with the oldest and work my way down. I'll whoop each one of you with this switch until someone confesses."

When Dad told me this story, I couldn't believe it. Pappy had never shown us such meanness. "Seriously? He beat all of you over it?" I asked in dismay.

Dad shook his head. "No. Sill confessed to doing it and took the beating. He knew that Dad wasn't going to believe anything we said," he shared.

"Wow!" I replied. I couldn't imagine any of my siblings taking a beating for another. I know that I wouldn't do it for any of them, nor could I see them doing it for me.

Another thing my dad's story showed me was that hillbilly men never like to admit when they are wrong.

Yet as a grandfather, Pappy would race Timmy.

Starting at age five until he was ten, Timmy would pat Pappy on the shoulder.

"Let's race, Pappy!" he'd exclaimed. Then they'd take off. For years, Pappy would win. The first time that Timmy beat Pappy was a proud day for him.

"I beat Pappy!" he said excitedly.

It wasn't because Pappy let him. The concept of letting a child win to build his confidence was not a part of our family practices. Timmy was a trying child, but Pappy never found him so.

I think Pappy worked at being a better grandfather than he had been a father. (I would say the same thing about my own father). Once when I was around eighteen or nineteen, I was complaining to him about a disagreement with my dad about the role of women. My dad liked to use the Bible to keep me in certain roles that I rebelled against, nor did I agree with his biblical interpretation concerning the subject. He was raised Baptist by Pappy, who had raised me Pentecostal. The Assemblies of God are a lot less restrictive on female roles than the Baptist, and they greatly influenced my own interpretations. I had female teachers at church and witnessed female preachers. To me, God was no respecter of persons and did not limit a person because of their gender. Dad, though, disagreed with this sentiment. The older I became, the more this became a bone of contention between us.

"You know, Amy, your dad's like that because that's the way I raised him to be," Pappy acknowledged.

"You don't think that way now, right?" I asked.

"If I could do it all over again, I'd do things very differently," he confessed.

I was glad that Pappy hadn't tried to influence me in a way that put limits on me because of my gender. Instead, he always encouraged me. Now that my dad is older, though, he is more like Pappy. Growing up and as a young adult, I often hit my head against the wall of his chauvinism. He strongly believed the man was the head of the family and had lordship over all areas. Women couldn't be preachers or pastors—something I completely disagreed with. Women were responsible for the household work. Luckily, he has mostly left that thinking

behind in the last millennia. Ironically, all three of my brothers grew up to get jobs as cooks, and they are much better cooks than I am. They are even better cooks than my sisters and my mother.

My dad had his mother until he was a husband and a father. My paternal grandmother was Brookie Hall Click and died in her mid-sixties when I was thirteen. We called her Nanny. I do not have very many memories of her because she didn't seem to care much for any of my dad's children except for Jason. When Jason was one, he lived with Pappy and Nanny while dad was on deployment, so both Pappy and Nanny had a special bond with Jason. I don't think Nanny ever forgave Mom for marrying dad and thus providing Jason with a mother who wasn't her. She sent us \$5 once for Christmas, and I know she made me a beautiful afghan that one of my cousins stole from me—it was a work of art. Like most hillbilly women, Nanny had mastered the traditional homemaker skills like quilting, crocheting, and cooking.

My mom had nothing nice to say about Nanny even though she didn't speak badly of her. I think Nanny intimidated mother. From what I gather, Nanny tried hard to split my parents up when they were first married, telling Dad that Mom was mean to Jason and things like that. My mother told me one story about Nanny that I found particularly disturbing.

"Jody [my dad's ex] was in a real bad car wreck when Jason was three. I had just married your dad. It was such a bad accident that her sister wasn't sure she would live," Mom told me. "Her sister called Joe asking if he'd bring Jason by the hospital to see her, saying she was begging to see her baby. Brookie's response was, 'She don't need to see him.' So your dad didn't let him. I always thought that was cruel, but your dad always did everything his mom said," Mother shared.

That story fits with what all I heard about Nanny from Uncle Sil's wife, Aunt Lynn, who Nanny lived with the last few years of her life. Nanny was a drunk, and I can't imagine how she

was ever a pastor's wife. I guess she wasn't a very good one. Pappy didn't believe in divorce, so he and Nanny never divorced. However, they did separate as soon as the children were raised and lived in different states most of the time that I knew them.

Dad told me once, "Dad could switch us hard, but he rarely did so in anger. So none of us kids were afraid of him. It was Ma we were scared of. When she worked graveyards and one of us would wake her up, she would just start beating on us with whatever she got her hands on. A broom, a shoe, whatever." He laughed as he told me this. "If you ran, she'd git you when you came back to the house!"

That's very different from my mother, who rarely spanked any of us. If she grounded us, you just had to be really nice for a few hours or a day, and she would unground you. I can think of one or two times only that my mother ever slapped me, and it was when I deserved it for being particularly rude. It's easy to say that Nanny was very different from Aunt Inez, the grandmother of my heart. Sadly, Nanny died drinking and driving. Having left a bar drunk, she drove herself off a mountain and crashed her truck. Her neck was broken, and her lungs filled with fluids—as a smoker she had emphysema. My dad was devastated for her loss, but I can't say it affected me at all. However, it was probably the only time I can recall him crying as a child. Jason and I were allowed to leave school and go with him to Kentucky for the funeral. She was cremated, but there was still a viewing beforehand. It was odd. Dad said that was Beba's call even though Nanny didn't want even that. I just know Dad obsessively took pictures of everything—even the spreading of the ashes over her parents' grave.

I don't know much else about Nanny except that her family owned a graveyard in Kentucky, and she was close to one of her sisters. My dad speaks about his maternal cousins often and because of Facebook he's reconnected with a few of them. Losing a parent at any age,

I would imagine, is rough. Mothers are often the glue that keeps family members connected. It seems to me that every time a matriarch dies, the family becomes a bit more fragmented. How can you keep the pieces together? It is even more difficult if you find yourself having very little in common with the people you are supposed to be closest to.

The callousness and cruelty that Nanny possessed I sometimes saw in my dad. Of course, he never lined us up to beat us or did anything like the story my dad told about Pappy. However, he wasn't good to cats. In fact, he hated them. As a kid, he told me how he and his friends use to go around town shooting cats with their BB guns. Once, he threw my cat Brownie into the pond when my cat woke him up from a nap, jumping onto Dad's head (his favorite position). Luckily, Brownie used up one of his nine lives and survived without injury. I was really angry even though it was an incredible throw. Poor Brownie was flailing in the air, terrified. Yet, when our dog Puppy fell into the iced-over pond once, Dad jumped in to save him. Cats were not revered, but dogs were. If any of the neighbor's dogs, though, came around his chickens or any dog we owned, Dad would not hesitate to shoot the dog. I lost a purebred Great Dane for that reason after I went to college. My dog, Jordan, kept killing Dad's chickens. But when Puppy, the only dog we had for over a decade, was drowning my dad didn't hesitate to save him.

Both my dad and Pappy were country boys at heart and always found ways to keep busy. Dad told me that Pappy worked so much after his retirement that he got in trouble with Social Security and had to pay money back. I remember Pappy always gardening. He passed on his industrious nature to my dad. Growing up, my dad always had Jason and me doing something to aid one of his many projects. I helped lay down tile, put up sheet rock, paint the house, put up fencing, tar the roof, and work in the garden. Surprisingly, I did all this before I was fifteen.

Can I do any of these things as an adult? No. My dad had two different ways of parenting me and Jason. Jason, the male, got taught how to do all these things and could repeat the tasks unsupervised. Since I was female, I was just a helper. No mechanics of anything were explained to me. All the men in my family, including my younger brothers, are incredibly able when it comes to fixing or building things. I am so bad that when I took the military ASVAB test during my senior year of high school, I scored a 7% in mechanics and electronics in an 83% overall score. A smart, capable female, I was someone my dad knew could follow directions and assist. However, it never occurred to him that I needed or should have the same instructions as my brothers.

My dad is a diabetic and has been having trouble with his vision. He is slowly going blind. His Kindle Fire allowed him to read for a while. After his vision worsened, I bought him a 32-inch television as a computer monitor. Even though he has these limitations, they do not seem to interfere with his shooting ability. Not long ago, he opened his back door and saw a possum too close to his precious chickens. Without hesitation, he got his shotgun out of his room (he keeps it in the corner in plain sight). Then he proceeded to kill the possum from twenty yards away. I guess that would be a good example of muscle memory eclipsing a physical handicap. It also shows how much shooting was a part of my dad's childhood—not even visual impairment slows him down completely.

Now that I am grown and my dad retired, he still finds ways to stay busy. He built a storage shed for himself made out of materials he'd salvaged from an old trailer on his property. He bought a few two by fours and some nails, but the entire building he made from things he found on his property. Even the shingles on the roof, he had given to him by a neighbor. I helped hold up a wall in the process. When he was on the roof, I was terrified he

would fall off since he was over sixty and diabetic with some vision impairment. However, he didn't stop until his project was complete. He even installed a little window in it.

Getting old is hard on him. His body is failing him as diabetes claims more and more of him. Some days it hurts him too much to get out of bed. Other days, he is replacing door handles on his truck, mowing the lawn, trimming the wild brush on his property, or working on his RV that he wants to sell. Last summer, he actually caught himself on fire while trying to get the RV started.

I was at work when he called me and shared his misadventure.

“What's up, Dad?” I asked.

“I got the RV started, but it would only run for about thirty seconds,” he said. “So, I was pouring gasoline on the carburetor trying to get it to start when it backfired. Set me on fire.”

This announcement was followed by a chuckle of amusement from him.

“What?” I asked, sure I misunderstood. Did his laughter mean he was kidding?

“I set myself on fire,” he said.

“You mean, like, literal fire?” I asked, trying to comprehend his words. Surely, I was misunderstanding?

“Yes, my pants were on fire and the carpet in the RV. I slapped the fire out of my jeans and stomped the carpet. You would've laughed your ass off if you'd seen me,” he said with a chuckle. “I totally knew better. It's what makes it so bad.”

In my family, we do tend to laugh at each other's mistakes, including our own, but this was a new extreme.

“Are you okay?” I inquired, concerned.

“I burned my hand pretty bad,” he said. “I got some blisters.”

“Are you going to the ER?” I asked.

“Nah. I’ll just keep an eye on it and see how it heals up,” he said.

When I got home, I found that his hand was blistered with three large blisters. Of course, he still refused to go to the doctor. Instead, he tended it himself with all the medicines he’s collected. His legs are always getting banged up every time he works on a project. Diabetes causes the skin to be thin and easily bruised. With this incident, he waited until it healed up before working more on the RV. It kept him idle for a week. Then he was back, working on his project. He has changed the starter, the ignition switch, the fuel pump, and the carburetor all to get running so that he could sell it. It was running, but the engine died too easily. Not long ago, he told me that he'd been trying to get the alternator out since he'd finally determined that was the real problem. A job that once would've taken him twenty minutes now takes several hours. Although this frustrates him, he refuses to stay idle.

"When you're idle, that's when you just die," he says. "It's important to stay busy after retirement."

This industrious nature, I believe, is the hillbilly blood in him. Hillbillies had to survive in the mountains with little income. Hard work is in his blood. I believe that when my dad's time is up on this earth, it will happen while he's outside working on some project of his—at least that's my hope.

I definitely am the only kid of his that inherited this quality. If I am not working, I feel like I am wasting time. As a teenager, I would watch television, read a book, and listen to music on headphones all at the same time. This helped me later when I got into fast food management and then waiting tables. If I am not doing more than one thing at a time, I feel lazy. Today, I

never sit and watch TV even though I watch hours and hours of it. I am always writing, reading, or grading while doing so. If I sleep past eight, I feel like I am wasting my day.

My industrious nature really became apparent in high school my senior year. I was a shift-leader and worked about thirty-five hours a week while maintaining all A's except for one B in chemistry. I did this while being involved heavily in competitive speech and drama, mock trial, Students Against Driving Drunk, and the Honor Society as well as going to church two times a week. During my undergraduate years, I normally worked full-time while taking fifteen to nineteen credit hours every semester. When I worked on my first master's in education, I substitute taught at Chicago Public Schools nearly every school day while waiting tables four or five nights a week. Two nights a week I went to graduate class. During this last graduate degree, I have worked three jobs the entire time as well as take care of my niece and nephew. I am truly physically incapable of idleness. This quality, I know, I get from both my parents. We continuously find things to do that keep us productive—it's the best way to live.

Chapter 5: Mom

It is difficult to write about my mother because, like many mother-daughter relationships, ours has always been complicated and turbulent. As I write this, I can honestly say she is not a person I need or want around me. However, that hasn't always been the case since I can remember as a child being excited to see her when I got home from school and disappointed when she wasn't there.

My mother told me that she married my dad at eighteen, and he was the only serious boyfriend she ever had. Dad had been married before and divorced because Jason's mother stepped out on him when he was deployed in the Army. That means Dad was married and divorced by the time he was twenty-one because he married Mom when he was twenty-three in 1975. I was born two years later. Mom once told me that she and Dad had talked about having a dozen kids. That is a horrific thought, and I am glad they stopped at Joey. As the oldest daughter, too much of the child-rearing and housework fell to me. The thought of more siblings after Joey was a great fear of mine.

Madeline Spivey is the name my mother was born with. She always felt a bit hurt that she never had a middle name. Most hillbilly parents give their kids three names. Mother is the only one I have ever met without one. In fact, if you look at the Click family tree going back to early 1800s, every name has a middle one. Since her mother died at age four and she has no memories of her, she can't really ask why. Linda's middle name is Sue and Thelma's middle name is Louise, which is also the name of my mom's mom—Thelma. Although Aunt Inez and Uncle Mark gave my mother a great life and loved her, not adopting her and making her their kid marked her in a way that very few realized.

I asked her once how she could have married my dad when he was so different from Uncle Mark. She said, "Aunt Inez and Uncle Mark weren't very affectionate. I knew they loved me, but they weren't one to hug and kiss. Your dad was very affectionate."

Her comment surprised me because I saw Aunt Inez and Uncle Mark's warmth and readily hugged them, and it was always returned. It never occurred to me that if I hadn't initiated it, they wouldn't have. My family is an affectionate family. When I joined a church in Chicago several years ago, I realized how much my family or Southernism marked me as different. A church lady even told me, "I've been reading the book called the *Five Love Languages*, and your gift is definitely touch."

I hadn't realized that I could rarely speak to someone without touching them. My mother, though, finds me cold and unaffectionate because I don't like to be petted or babied. Yes, in our family, grown children are petted and coddled. I find it annoying and demeaning. "I'm not a dog, don't pet me," is my real response. Is this because I'm the oldest and was petted less growing up? I don't honestly know. I just know that hugs are okay, but don't pet my hair like I'm a dog or cat. My mother sees this attitude as a rejection of her maternal love. How do you explain to someone who basically speaks a different language that the adult me doesn't want what the child me never received? That's how I feel about my mother—we speak different languages. Unfortunately, I cannot say with confidence where this disconnect comes from or how early it started.

If I had to guess, I would think it began in the seventh grade when I gave my mother a poem I wrote. Back then, I was heavily into writing poetry. I often showed my mother my poems, and she would dutifully read them. "That's nice, Amy," she would say. However, this

last time, she said, "It doesn't rhyme." Then, I knew she and I were not just speaking different languages, we were in different worlds.

Mother tried, though. I know that she did. Since I was very active in speech and drama, I had roles in close to a dozen plays from seventh to twelfth grade. She was the only parent that ever attended all my performance and always smiled proudly. My dad drove a school bus when I was in high school and drove to my competitions and saw me compete, so he never felt a desire to attend an actual play. Competition pieces were short. He was there the first time I received first place in prose my freshman year, and he was there the time I earned first place in an original oratory my senior year. In fact, I can still remember the look of pride on his face when I went through rounds until finals and won. Both parents supported me, but I never felt connected to my mother the way I did my dad.

A psychiatrist would probably say my disconnect can be attributed directly to my father. As a child I observed my father and how he would treat my mother. At times, he was great—affectionate and loving. Other times, though, he was demeaning and controlling. In fact, I felt strongly as a teenager that my father held me in more respect than my mother—at least I felt he valued me more than I observed him valuing my mother. Because she allowed him to disrespect her or control her, I lost respect for her. This habit of my dad's probably occurred because my mother was so young and inexperienced when they married. My dad is five years older than she. By the time they married, he'd been married, divorced, and served four years in the military. That is a lot of life experience compared to my mother's. Dad never treated other women disrespectfully. In fact, he held his own mother up to a very high esteem. Nor did I ever see him show disrespect to his sister or sisters-in-law. To my youthful eyes, he only acted that way

toward my mother. Although it made me angry at him, I blamed my mother more, thinking that she *allowed* it.

It wasn't until I was an adult and they were separated that I finally got it. My mother didn't graduate from high school, dropping out in the tenth grade. My dad was highly intelligent and well-read. Although he loved my mother, I suspect his first wife, Jason's mom, was the great love of his life, and when she cheated on him, it broke something inside him. He has said to me recently (he and his first wife reconnected on Facebook) that the pain of her betrayal almost destroyed him. In fact, he said, nothing in his life had ever hurt as bad. It makes sense that he would chose for his next partner someone weaker, easier to control. Someone who would never be bold enough to step out on him.

A child can't ever really understand what goes on between their parents, but I felt only relief when they finally parted when I was in my twenties. I never understood why my dad was so upset at her leaving because they clearly weren't happy the past five years of their marriage. My mother had become a bitter, unhappy person while my dad is naturally a positive, upbeat person. Nothing could make my mom happy—I surely couldn't.

But I tried.

If I spent an entire day watching my four siblings while she was at work, cleaning the kitchen and living room twice—because if it wasn't clean when my parents got home I didn't do anything all day—as well as the bathroom and the bedrooms, she would come home look around and yell, "Amy, why couldn't you do the laundry?"

I would look at her and think, "Seriously? That's all you have to say?" There was no pleasing her. Nothing I ever did seemed good enough. I cannot ever recall her once saying, "Good job, Amy." Or even a simple, "Thanks, Amy, for all you do." Instead, it was always,

"Amy, you need to do this..." Or, "Why didn't you do this?" It never seemed like I could do anything right as a teenager.

If I complained loud enough, Dad would make Jason do the dishes, but that was rare. When I got my first job my junior year in 1993, I was so excited because I not only was out of the house, people *paid* me money to do dishes. For my parents, though, my absence did not make for a happy home. The more I was gone, the more things began to fall apart. Four years after graduation, my mom left my dad. A few years later, the divorce was final.

For the first year after the separation, my mom and I were actually close. It was like the chip on her shoulder was gone the moment she left my dad. We were finally adults together, friends even. My mother is naturally a bit like Aunt Inez—hospitable, generous, and selfless. Her selflessness, though, is almost a vice because as my siblings grew up and into dysfunctional roles, she allowed a lot of bad behavior, excusing it, feeling sorry for them, enabling them. She still does it to this day. It is now the main point of contention between us, especially in her dealings with my brother Timmy.

Although my mother spent twenty years living in Oklahoma, the same amount she had spent in Kentucky before moving back after her divorce, I would not say that she embraced the redneck way. By nature, she is shy and unassuming. A real chatterbox when she knows the person, but she won't say much around strangers. My bold, confident personality does not come from her. She was a certified nurse aid, so taking care of people and nurturing is a part of her DNA. My constant need to help my siblings time and time again of the past two decades probably comes from her. She never gives up on people. Also, I am a light sleeper like she is. Growing up, she could call my name from downstairs and I would wake up, fully alert.

As far as I could see, Mother didn't have much in common with my dad. She went camping with us, but I never sensed that she enjoyed it. A horrible fear of drowning kept her from boats or lakes for the most part. Like the hillbilly tradition, she is home-bound and happiest at home with family. Of course, she does love her rummage sales (what my family calls garage sales). My sisters take after my mother in that regard. They can go shopping for hours, whereas I am like my dad—get in and get out. The faster I can complete a shopping expedition, the happier I am.

Like Aunt Inez, Mother is adept in the kitchen and handy with many of the same hillbilly talents. My mother is a good cook, crochets, and quilts. Once, a decade ago, she made me this really big quilt. She did the entire thing by hand—even tacking on the back. Being the ungrateful daughter that I am, I couldn't believe she chose a yellow color. Did she know me at all? I detest the color yellow. Every roommate or friend I've ever had knew that about me because I am always very vocal about my distaste. My sisters even know that. The fact that my mother didn't know that told me how little she listens to me or pays attention to me or my life. She spent countless hours making me a quilt that I literally couldn't bear the sight of (my distaste of yellow is extreme). Of course, a good daughter would've just pretended to love it and thanked her nicely. I was just flabbergasted that she spent so much time making something for me in a color I really hated. To me, it cemented how little she bothered to understand me. It was proof of how even as an adult there was nothing but distance between us. To her, of course, my rejection of her gift was a rejection of her and her love. Nothing seems to connect us.

If my mother had been raised by her mother, would things between us be different? Are there things only a mother can teach a child? My mother was four when my maternal grandmother, Thelma, passed away from a long battle with ovarian cancer at thirty-six years of

age. My Aunt Inez was very close to her since Aunt Inez was her mother's first born and Grandma Thelma was the youngest. Since I know how close I am with my baby sister, I understand that bond. From all accounts, my grandmother was a sweet woman. My Aunt Linda looks the most like her, but I think my mom might be the most like her in personality.

When I was struggling with what to do with Emily's mother, I asked my mom, "Mom, was it better to have no contact with your mother but raised by people who loved you and cared for you or to know that your mother is alive somewhere even if she didn't call or anything?"

I'll never forget my mother's response. "It's always better to know your mom's alive, Amy, because at least then you know she's out there somewhere. There's the possibility of seeing her again someday. If your mom's dead, there's no hope for that at all."

The loss of a parent—even if you can't remember them—is not something a child ever gets over.

Mother's father was Mose Spivey. We called him grandpa, and he was very different from Pappy. Grandpa only liked me and my older brother Jason. He complained loudly whenever he'd be shuffled to my mother's oldest sister, Aunt Linda's house.

"Those damn kids of hers won't let me watch what I want on TV!" he'd tell me when he would return.

In his younger years, Grandpa had been a mean, adulterous drunk. He had been married before meeting my grandmother, Aunt Inez's youngest sister. There were five children from that marriage. However, he had been a deadbeat dad, and Mother never knew any of her half-siblings. Grandpa used a cane because he had been injured in the coal mines as a younger man. He lived with us when he became too frail to be on his own in Michigan when I was in second grade. It took him two years before he succumbed to lung cancer.

He had no teeth and was always sending me to the store to buy him candy: sugar-coated orange slices and lemon drops. Jason and I would get some—no one else. Timmy was the bane of his existence. Of course, we did not know then that Timmy was partially deaf; we all just thought he was mean and didn't listen. Grandpa always complained about Timmy. They seemed to be forever pranking the other, but Timmy thought it was a game. We all knew, though, that Grandpa sought to make Timmy suffer. Unfortunately, he was more than a bit mean-spirited.

He would lie in wait for Timmy like a stalking cat. I saw him once hiding behind a door. When Timmy approached, he stuck out his cane to trip Timmy.

“Grandpa! Why did you do that?” I asked in dismay.

“What?” he asked. “I was just walking. He tripped.” Then he turned and hobbled away, unabashed.

Once, I saw him throw the cat at Timmy when he went around the corner. I never understood this spitefulness of his that mostly came out when he was around Timmy. However, after he died, I heard other stories of his cruelty. When my maternal grandmother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer when Mom was three or four, he began an affair with her closest friend, who cared for her and watched my mom. From all reports, my grandmother had been a warm, gentle lady who loved Jesus.

I asked Aunt Inez once how she had ended up married to Grandpa, who she obviously had little in common with.

“He was her second husband, you know. Thelma was married to Linda's daddy first. He was her true love. Linda's daddy died in the coal mines saving a man's life,” Aunt Inez said.

“Aunt Linda mentioned that once. She was just a baby, though, right?” I asked.

“Yes. Mose was the only daddy Linda knew,” Aunt Inez said.

“Aunt Linda loved him,” I said.

Aunt Inez nodded. “Back then, women with a baby got remarried. But he was good with the girls, especially your mother. However, he was such a drunk that he couldn’t take care of them after Thelma passed,” she explained. “But he was always good to Linda Sue.”

“How did you end up with Mom and Thelma?” I asked.

“My boys were grown, and it made the most sense. My sister Ethel had six kids and Laverne four. My parents lived across the street and took in Linda. It just worked out that way,” she explained. “Also, my sister asked me to take care of them if Mose couldn’t. Since my boys were grown, it was an easy choice to make. I always wanted daughters—now I have two.”

Grandpa may have been a lousy husband and not the best father, but I loved him because he was always good to me. Like most hillbillies, though, he was a stubborn, contrary man. I will never forget when I was in second grade, and we lived in some apartments in Oklahoma City. It was the first time that we’d ever had a dishwasher. I decided to try it out.

“Grandpa, how much soap do I put in?” I asked, holding up the bottle of Dawn.

“Fill’er up!” he replied.

I did so. Several minutes later, I noticed the kitchen filling with suds.

“Oh no, Grandpa! Look!” I yelled, running toward the kitchen.

Grandpa’s eyes widened as he took in the mess. The suds covered every inch of the kitchen floor, and the pile was growing by the minute. “Grab some towels!” he shouted.

I ran to do so. After I grabbed the towels in the bathroom, I gave him some and kept some. “Dad’s going to be mad if we don’t get this cleaned up before he gets home!” I exclaimed.

I'll never forget the sight of him bending down as he held onto his cane as we desperately attempted to clean up the suds. We did manage to get the suds up. I can't actually recall if we ever told my parents about the incident or not. However, it was a lesson I never forgot.

A similar mishap occurred with the first microwave we had. In third grade, we moved to Noble, a small-town south of Norman, Oklahoma. The house we moved into had a microwave. It's my earliest memory of one. Pappy had shown me how to use it (for two years both grandpas lived with us). When I saw him try to cook a potato in it, I noticed it was wrapped in aluminum foil.

"Grandpa, I don't think you're supposed to put metal or anything in it. Pappy said no silverware. Isn't foil made out of metal?" I asked.

He glared at me. "I was a cook for twenty years! I know how to cook!" he informed me. He put the potato in the microwave, slamming the door and starting it. Sparks flew, and he opened it, removing the potato.

"See, I told you!" I said smugly. He glared but said nothing.

Mother took care of Grandpa until he started coughing up black stuff from his lungs and was hospitalized; his years working in the coal mines gave him black lungs. I never saw him again once he was hospitalized since my parents decided that I didn't need to see him dying. It hurt a lot that I never got to tell him goodbye. I'm not sure he knew how much I loved him. He was loved by both my mother and me probably more than anyone else in the family. For some reason known only to him, he treated us better than others. His funeral was the first one I ever went to. He died when I was in the fourth grade.

My mother, as a certified nurse aid, loved caring for her father. It's not something I could see doing with my own father even though he is closest to me than my sisters these days. My sister Kelly is also a certified nurse aid and takes after my mother the most.

The place, though, my mother and I can actually connect is with her grandchildren. Although she believes I favor Eli over Emily, we do bond over the three of them. She was very excited last spring to get to come to Oklahoma and spend a month. Luke, Kelly's youngest, is the most active child I have ever seen. Since I grew up with Timmy and Kelly, that says a lot. He is like the two of them in one child. My mother exhausted herself trying to keep up with him. I thought Kelly was scary when she did dare devil things, but she waited until she was six before jumping off the garage. Luke will jump off anything that he can climb. Before he was two, he was finding things to climb. A few months ago, I bought him a new outfit. It took him twenty minutes to rip the shirt.

"What happened?" I asked Jake, his dad.

"He was trying to climb the fence, and his shirt got stuck on it," Jake said.

In August, Sherry and I took a trip to see mother in Kentucky. We must have been a bit insane when we decided to take all three of the kids with us. Although I still contend the three of them are not as bad as my siblings were growing up, it was pretty horrific. Mainly because Luke's favorite past time is pulling Emily's hair and watching her scream. Although she is five years older than he is, he somehow always gets the upper hand.

Mother was very excited to have everyone for a few days. We went to the park and had a big picnic with the family and several cousins. Of course, Luke went up any ladder that led to a slide. This made us nervous, but he seemed to do so with ease. He turned two the week we visited, but he was a very agile two. An hour of him doing so without incident caused us to let

down our vigil. Then he fell backward off one of the ladders. My mother was watching him and saw the fall, but she was too far away. Fortunately, his fall terrified Mother more than it hurt him since he landed on grass. I am surprised, though, he doesn't have brain damage yet as many times as he has hit his head. Kids are very resilient. Although Mom raised six children, grandkids can be an entire new level of stress and yet more joy.

Emily responds really well to my mother's gentle nature. Bath time used to be very stressful with Emily a few years ago. She would cry like she was being abused if you washed her hair or *any* amount of water go in her eyes. My argument that the water from the splashpad was the same as bathwater got nowhere with her. However, Mother could get her in a bath and washed without any problems. Sadly, I do *not* have the patience my mother has. Emily is overly emotional, which I find distasteful and frustrating. In this, she reminds me of both Sherry and Kasi, her mother. With Sherry, though, I could ignore her or let mother deal with her. Emily is my responsibility, so I strive to find the grace my mother has.

Most days, I fail.

My mother continues to have health problems related to her smoking and yet continues to smoke. She had stopped entirely when I was a teenager, but she hasn't been able to now that it is more important she do so. This type of hillbilly stubbornness makes me crazy. I just don't understand it. My cousin Junior died the spring of 2018 from congestive heart failure and diabetes at age forty-five. When he first became ill several years ago, he worked hard to lose the weight and was healthy. It didn't last. My mother knows she going to die drowning in her own fluids because she took care of patients with emphysema, and yet she won't quit smoking.

Fear of diabetes and congestive heart failure—the two main killers in my family has kept me going to the gym even if it's infrequent. I'm constantly working at eating less chocolate and

trying to be healthy because I don't want to have health problems that are my fault. There are so many things in the world we can't control, but we can control what we choose to eat. My mother's refusal to quit smoking makes no logical sense.

For the past decades or so, Mother has been trying to find something physically wrong with me.

"Amy, your ankles look swollen. I think you're retaining water. You should go get that checked," she says to me each time I visit her. It is now 2018, and she said this to me just this past Easter weekend.

"Yes, Mother, you've been telling me this nearly all my adult life," I told her. I turned to Sherry, my youngest sister. "Hasn't she, Sherry?"

"Yes, actually, you have, Mom. You say it to her all the time," Sherry said, laughing.

What is it about mothers that require the constant criticism?

Chapter 6: Jason

My oldest brother Jason is the one who inherited the cruelty gene. Sometimes, I suspect he is a psychopath or has psychopathic tendencies at the very least. However, growing up, he was never cruel to me. In fact, when I was five and he was ten, he let me follow him everywhere. As I was writing this book, I asked my mother if I was remembering him wrong. Was he mean or cruel as a kid?

"No," she said, shaking her head. "He sometimes lied to get out of trouble. Once he stole some candy from the store. But I made him take it back, and he apologized."

"So, he didn't make me cry like Eli makes Emily cry?" I asked, wanting to be sure.

"Nope. I could leave you two together and not worry. When you were two, he'd play real good with you," she said. "He was great with you."

I remember living in Oklahoma City when I was six, and in the summer, Jason would take me nearly every day to the public swimming pool to go swimming with him. The week I got the chicken pox was the only week we ever spent apart. It was no surprise then that I worshiped Jason. When first grade started, this cute little black puppy followed me home from the bus stop. I gave him to Jason, and he named him Puppy. Dad said that he was half German Shepard and half Doberman. This meant that the mailman was his enemy. In fact, it only took a few months before we got a letter in the mail from the mailman saying that he would not deliver our mail until we tied up our vicious dog. He wasn't vicious. For some reason, he only bit or tried to bite the mailman. Dad, though, wouldn't tie Puppy up until he got hit by a second car. He loved chasing cars almost as much as he loved running off the mailman. Thus, began Puppy's long life chained up.

I didn't know until I was seven or eight that Jason and I had different mothers. When I was in second grade, his biological mom, Jody, obtained custody of him. It was a shock to the family because we didn't know she existed. Jason had no memories of her. My mother was the only mother he had ever known. However, she had a lot more money and managed to win custody. Dad had legal custody of Jason in Kentucky, but he never thought to refile or apply when we moved to Oklahoma. She took advantage of that slip, and Jason stayed with her for two years.

I was devastated to lose him. That's when Pappy came to live with us. When Jason came back two years later, I was overjoyed. However, he was changed greatly from the brother that I had so adored. The cruelty that I had never experienced from him began manifesting itself. He was very mean to Timmy, always making him cry. Once, he tied Kelly up in the barn and shoved hay down her pants. She was around seven or eight. He would lock our baby sister, Sherry, in the attic to scare her, telling her that the evil Chuckie doll was going to get her. Another time, he convinced Timmy to pee in a coffee cup. Then he convinced Kelly to drink it, telling her it was warm tea. There was always something like that occurring that showed me and my mother how very different Jason had become. Unfortunately, my dad was blind to these things and refused to either see it or admit that it was there. For some reason, though, Jason never did anything to me. In fact, he was always good to me—only me, however.

It was his cruelty to animals, though, that disturbed me the most. We had goats when I was a kid. The Billy goat was a large, hornless white goat. Because Jason was always trying to ride him, he was very mean. In fact, it was dangerous to approach him without a weapon in your hand to defend yourself. Jason made him that way by always trying to ride him like a horse. He and the other goats were kept inside of an electric fence—a fence that he would always convince

Timmy to touch. It amused him to see Timmy get shocked by the electricity, so he would do it every chance he could. Also, Jason often entertained himself by shaking the feed bucket so that the animals would come running, expecting to be fed. Jason got a thrill out of holding the bucket above the fence so that they would be electrocuted. It didn't harm them permanently, but it hurt them. Dad saw this as a harmless pastime, but it deeply disturbed me. The Jason I had known was very different than this new brother with a twisted and dark sense of humor. This new brother a real darkness lurking inside him.

The final proof of this occurred when I was around fifteen. I had this cat that I loved that was mostly white and so sweet. The only cat after Brownie that I let myself love. I called her Tink. Tink disappeared for a week, and I was upset. However, she miraculously reappeared a week later. She had been gravely injured and most of the fur and skin was ripped off her back. It looked like she had been either caught in a trap of some kind or the mouth of some larger animal. Spending money on an animal, especially a cat, was not done in my family. My dad wouldn't even buy cat food. Only dogs got any type of special treatment. Luckily, my mother had a way with animals. She kept Tink caged up for a week to make sure she didn't have rabies. She nursed Tink back to health, putting iodine on her until her skinned back began to heal, bandaging her with duct tape and old socks—the redneck way.

Tink looked incredibly ugly, but she was better, healing more every day. Declaring her well, Mom let her out. The skin was completely healed, but her back was bald. Then we went on vacation to Kentucky. Dad left Jason, who was an adult at twenty, behind to care for the animals. When we returned, all the chickens but two were gone and so was my cat. Jason sold the chickens for money and claimed he didn't know what happened to my cat. However, I just knew that he had done something to Tink. A day or so later, I found her remains in the burn

barrel. To my horror, I realized that he'd burned my kitty alive. When I confronted him in front of my parents, he vehemently denied it. When we were alone, though, he'd grin and laugh about his actions.

“That cat was disgusting to look at! It made me sick. I was just putting it out of its misery!” he said smugly.

The look of pleasure, though, in his eyes was what really frightened me. This was *not* the big brother I had once revered and adored as a young child. The brother who had been so good to me as a child was no more. Although he wrote once from prison that he was sorry for killing my cat, I am not sure I believe him now. Honestly, I no longer believe Jason is really capable of either genuine remorse or compassion. When he came back from Ohio, it was clear that the hillbilly cruelty was alive and well in him. In my opinion, it is more obvious today than ever.

In September of 2001, I found out exactly how changed my older brother was. The favor he had always shown me had its limits. However, prior to that, Jason remained a brother to me. He left Oklahoma at age twenty-one or so for Wyoming where our cousins and Pappy had moved to. Jason was the only brother I had that never turned to drugs. He once told me that dependency on drugs and alcohol was a sign of weakness. I suspect that he was too controlling to ever allow himself to be taken over by a chemical. Unfortunately, though, Jason got in enough trouble without drug abuse. He was around twenty-five or so when he was arrested in Wyoming for embezzlement. It got reduced to forgery. He and a friend stole someone's payroll checkbook and went on a \$20,000 shopping spree. Jason spent a few years in prison in Wyoming. Unlike, my youngest brother Joey, Jason completely turned his life around after his four-year brush with the penal system. When he came back to Oklahoma, his life of crime was behind him. Not once since then has he ever been in legal trouble.

When I needed something, he was there. For a few years, I vowed to never let him down, hoping I would be able to help keep him on the right path. At first, it seemed to be working. I helped him by working to get him custody of his daughter Mckenna, who had been born in Wyoming right after he was arrested. Mckenna's mother had gotten charged with neglect and abandonment, and she was placed in foster care. We spent two years fighting to gain custody of her. Because Jason has been living in Florida at the time of the abandonment, DHS placed Mckenna with a first cousin of ours, Aunt Beba's oldest daughter. In 1999, we succeeded in winning custody and brought her home to Oklahoma. My mother was overjoyed to have her first grandchild close. Unfortunately, my mother left my dad not long after Mckenna came to live with them—Jason was staying at their place initially. The divorce was bitter and drawn out for years—Dad contested it. Jason didn't handle the upheaval well. Somehow, he and Dad both decided I was to blame—I didn't talk Mom out of leaving Dad. Strangely, both of them honestly believed I could be the puppet master if I wanted—I didn't. I figured if a person was unhappy in a marriage, they should be able to end it.

Little did I realize how angry Jason was over the entire mess. Both parents did spiteful things to one another after they separated. Jason, wanting a nice life for Mckenna, was caught in the middle. Sadly, he didn't handle the chaos well. In fact, he snapped. A dark day in September of 2001, Mom and I visited him and Mckenna, unaware of his rage. He attacked Timmy, who was with us, with a crowbar, hit my mother, and knocked me to the ground. Eventually, his hand was around my throat as he tried to strangle me—at least I feared that was his intent.

I wish I could blame it on drugs—I can't. All I know is that I was on the ground looking up at this brother I had loved without compromise as long as I could remember, and his hand was

squeezing my neck. He had hurt everyone that had ever loved him over the years, women, cousins, parents, and Pappy. Me, however, he had loved and treasured. For twenty-four years of my life, he watched out for me, protected me, and teased me. He loved me.

Until that day.

As I looked up at him, he held the crowbar raised in one hand and squeezed my neck with the other. A very surreal calm came over me—I felt at that moment a real presence of the Lord whispering in my ear: "Be still, Amy. Be calm." I was as close to death as I had ever been. I could see it in his eyes—the rage had pushed out all reason—madness flared inside of him.

In a quiet voice, I said, "Jason, what are you doing?" Although his hand was around my throat, he wasn't squeezing hard enough to damage my windpipe—not yet.

It was like he came back to himself. Suddenly, he let me go and stood up. My mother tried to coax him from his rage (he was reacting over a phone call Mother had made to the EPA that hurt Jason, not Dad as she intended). I gave Mom a sharp look. "Mom, be quiet," I whispered.

We had parked down the hill due to the mud. I knew that we needed to quickly get out of there before his cloud of rage returned. The situation was too volatile. I murmured quietly to Jason. "Of course, Jason. You're right, Jason," as he raged about what Mom had done. "I didn't know, Jason." I hadn't. "I'm really sorry, Jason." I kept calm and did nothing to incite his anger. Timmy had run off leaving us at the first sight of Jason's rage. Jason was the only person on the planet that Timmy actually feared, and he had left us to our fate.

We made it down the hill without further incident. Unfortunately, things were never the same. Jason, who my mother had raised from three years old, shattered her heart. He didn't allow us to see McKenna—that was the cruelest thing. Without a backward glance or any sign

of regret or apology, he walked away from the woman who had raised him. They have never reconciled. My mother never saw Mckenna again. This was the first piece of real evidence that Jason wasn't really capable of true love—at least not for women. For some reason, my father has never judged Jason for his behavior. Nor has he ever expressed his disapproval of Jason's actions toward us that day or my mother in general.

As for me, I saw Mckenna and Jason twice over the course of eight years. Things were never exactly the way they were between us, however. When I left Oklahoma for the first time in 2003, I knew that I needed space from Jason. He was like my own drug—one I could not quit unless forced to. Nine years of separation did good, though, to our relationship. We had a few good years from 2011-2014. I have long since forgiven him for his attack a decade earlier even as I never understood his actions with our mother. Now, though, I realize due to other acts of cruelty he did to Mckenna when she turned eighteen that he has something utterly distorted inside of him. I am actually convinced that he isn't capable of really loving anyone, especially women. Only when a person does everything he wants does he show affection and love. Once anyone goes against him, they are the enemy.

Of course, my dad disagreed and said that I am being judgmental, and that only God really knows what's in a person's heart and soul. My response, "Actions speak louder than words. Jesus said, 'Don't believe me because of what I say but because of what I do.' It's because of Jason's own actions that I judge him thus." Dad just shook his head, no longer willing to argue with me about his first-born. Probably because he could look at me and see that my mind was made up. As a man, though, he cannot recognize misogynist tendencies in his sons. I've seen it in Timmy in abundance. Jason hides it better, but it is there. It is difficult, I think, for my dad to acknowledge that in his sons. My dad never treated me less, so I know my brothers aren't

just following Dad's example. I do think, though, his chauvinistic tendencies growing up impacting them more than he wants to acknowledge. His lack of respect for our mother had to have impacted them negatively. Dad wasn't mean or cruel to mother, but he was disrespectful and controlling at times.

I know Jason cares deeply for our cousin Tommy and his three-year-old son, Jay Jr. However, I have not witnessed *unconditional* love from him toward *any* female. When Mckenna, who was forced (by him) to drop out of school since she was failing classes at age seventeen, got tired of giving all her paychecks to Jason, he kicked her out of the house, took away the truck she was paying for (he had financed it in his name), and had her step-grandfather turn off her phone. Then he denied her access to her sister and her baby brother. These acts of cruelty he did without hesitation or remorse, feeling completely justified. His first-born learned the hard way just what her father was capable of when he was crossed. Although I warned her when she turned eighteen what he was capable of, I do not think she believed me until she saw it firsthand.

Jason and I don't speak anymore. Although I am not angry with him, I'm just done being bullied or threatened. Luckily, he is in complete control of himself these days. However, can one ever be truly safe around a psychopath? I had rather not find out, so I don't go around him or any of his children. My happiness is in my own control, and I don't believe in allowing *anyone* to take away my joy. Jason has proven that he is capable of doing just that. No matter how much love I gave him, it was never returned in the same measure. What do you do when you become convinced that your greatest enemies live in your own family?

You walk away.

Chapter 7: Me

I gifted the world with my presence in McDowell, Kentucky on April 4, 1977. Today, the town has a population of 102 people, so I can't imagine it being larger when I was born. The town does, though, sport a hospital because all the mountain towns bleed into one another along a winding highway route that runs through the town. Although I was born in the flood of '77, my parents lived across the street from the hospital in McDowell. It began family raining on April second and didn't stop for three days, which caused all the riverbeds that go through the mountain to overflow. The flood was so bad that twenty-two people were killed in the area between Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia. Ten of those that died were in Kentucky.

My mother told me that I was the largest baby to have ever been born in the family at that point (and since) at nine and a half pounds and twenty-one inches long. Part of the reason I was so large was because my mother was three weeks late. I don't have too many memories of my time before we moved to Kentucky, but I have flashes of memory of my brother Jason and me playing. I remember being scared of the bear that lived in the mountains behind our house whose reported sightings haunted my early memories. To my young mind being eaten by a bear seemed a terrible way to die, so I have strong memories of being afraid of this reported bear in the woods behind our house. I am not sure if I just heard my parents talking about the sighting or if they told me and Jason not to play in the mountain behind the house. For a time, we lived in a small two-bedroom trailer that had rats in it. My life-long aversion for any rat-like animal such as mice, gerbils, hamsters, and possums probably began from these early fears of Jason telling me a rat was going to get me. I don't actually recall seeing any rats, but I could hear them at night—or he convinced me I was hearing them.

My dad's only means of transportation back then was this big yellow pick-up truck that he drove from Kentucky to Wyoming after Timmy was about a year old. I recall Mother holding Timmy in her arms as we followed Dad's siblings to Wyoming. Jason and I took turns sleeping on the floor of the truck. Today, this type of journey would be impossible due to the stricter car seat laws. Dad and Uncle Jack didn't find any job in Rock Springs where Dad's siblings were settling, so we journeyed to Oklahoma to follow Jack, who had a few siblings in Oklahoma City.

All my childhood memories before the age of eight center around my first cousins. First, Melissa and her siblings, Aunt Linda's kids. Then two years after we moved to OKC, dad's youngest brother Pokey moved in with us, bringing his wife and three kids. Life was never boring but filled with noise and constant chaos. Timmy was three when our cousins joined us, and he loved all the chaos.

I, however, had mixed feelings. I know that I was happy to have my cousin Tommy to play with. His sister, Sissy, wasn't too bad either. Jason, however, ruled the television in the evenings, so I spent the time when not in school watching game shows on television during the daytime. I rarely liked to run up and down the street with my cousins or brothers. Bob Barker and the *Price of Right* was my favorite summer program, and I dreamed of going to California to meet Bob.

When we lived in Oklahoma City, Jason and I did go to the park a few blocks away that had a public swimming pool. Dad had taught me how to doggie paddle at the lake when I was four or five, so I found that worked just fine at the pool. I was never a great swimmer, and I couldn't dive like my dad, who swam like a fish. Like all kids, though, I did enjoy the water. Although I was never particularly athletic, I learned to roller skate at age four and ride a bike

when I was six. But I never wanted to do these activities unless someone else wanted to do it. Watching television was my favorite thing to do because I loved the stories.

There must have been a great desire for a grandpa inside of me because, besides Bob Parker, President Ronald Regan was my favorite person to watch on television. I didn't meet my own grandpas until I was in second grade. Before that, I would sit on the floor in front of the TV whenever President Regan would address the nation. Unlike today's presidents, he always spoke from his desk, not standing at a podium, so it was like he was right there in front of me, talking directly to me. There was something about him that drew me in and made me pretend that he was my grandpa. I have no memories of my dad saying anything political or even openly endorsing Regan, but his kind eyes and warm manner always held my attention whenever he was speaking.

I was primed to have Pappy, my dad's dad, come stay with us when I was eight. Grandpa, my mom's dad, joined us a few months later. Eventually, Pappy had us attending Noble Assembly of God, and I had several senior citizens to embrace, developing close bonds with several until the day they died. My introduction to Christianity, though, didn't begin with Pappy. It began with a large Southern Baptist Church that had a very active children's ministry in Oklahoma City. Learning about Jesus and heaven marked me for all time. From that moment on, every choice I made and all my decisions are centered around the one constant relationship I have had: my relationship with Jesus Christ. I have never wavered in my belief in Him or my salvation.

When I first learned about heaven, though, it was not so much about heaven but about a fear of hell. I don't know if the teacher was that good of a speaker or if my imagination was that

vivid, but a fear of hell was definitely centered around my belief system. I know that I went home and asked my parents if they were saved, and when they told me no, I was devastated.

“That means you’re going to hell!” I cried, tears filling my eyes.

When I was older, Mother told me that she yelled at the bus driver for my reaction. I told her that I don’t really think anyone actually told me that, but I concluded that if Christians went to heaven then everyone else must go to hell. I didn’t need anyone to say it to me directly. Yet it wasn’t a fear of hell that kept me being good as much as a belief that Jesus would be happy if I was good. The belief in that shaped my identity more than any one thing.

Pappy had told Dad that Jason was going to be a great preacher someday, and he sent Jason two different children’s Bibles that were the entire Bible told in stories. I was in second grade when I read the first one. A year or so later, he sent Jason one in comic book form, and I read that one also. For two years, I got few opportunities to attend church once we moved out of the first church district, but I knew all the Bible stories because of my readings. My love of the history and the Old Testament were shaped by these early story readings. When we began attending Noble Assembly of God, I was in the fourth grade. Two years after I started attending, they began a program called Missionettes, which is like Girls Scouts for Christians. The Awanas—found in many Baptist churches—is the only program that I know that is similar. We earned badges for outside things like swimming and more domestic things like sewing. However, it was the Bible knowledge area that I excelled at because reading and memorizing things came easy to me. The program required the entire reading of the Bible, memorizing the books of the Bible in order and how to spell them as well as the entire thirteenth chapter of first Corinthians. It took me eighteen months to complete a program designed for three years.

When I graduated out of Missionettes, my study of the Bible took on a more mature approach. I probably read the entire Bible five or six times before I was sixteen, a feat that is exceedingly not normal for a teenager or even most adults. The beauty of the New King James language mesmerized me, however. The stories of the Old Testament were tragic and powerful and felt real to me. I would read the Bible with a notebook, writing down questions and confusing passages. Things that seem contradictory were quickly noted. If I didn't find a rational explanation for things, I would go from adult to adult at church, seeking someone that could satisfy my curiosity.

The first time I heard the story of Joshua causing the sun and moon to stand still was met with great skepticism.

"That's the craziest thing I've ever heard!" I exclaimed to my Sunday School teacher Marsha. "If the Earth stopped turning on its axis, we'd been thrown completely out of whack! It can't happen!"

Marsha calmly responded, "Why do you think we have Leap Year, Amy?"

Since I had no idea why we had leap year, I accepted her red herring for absolute truth.

When Reverend Boykin would preach and say something that I never heard before, I would quiz him when he was done preaching.

"Where is this sea of forgetfulness you keep mentioning?" I asked.

"Well, it's not exactly mentioned in the Bible," he admitted.

"Then why did you say it?" I replied. Historical and scriptural accuracy was very important to me as a fourteen-year-old.

Now I realize that these early years of Bible study were a great training ground for my life-long love of literature. The beauty of Shakespeare and Milton started with my early training

reading Psalms and Proverbs. The passion for the written word stayed with me through an English degree and hopefully one day a doctoral English degree.

I used my Bible studying time to combat some things I learned from my dad and Pappy that never made complete sense to me. Pappy told me once when I was nine or so that it was a sin for a woman to wear men's clothes, so I refused to wear shorts for two years. It didn't matter how much people mocked me or that I couldn't use my great height to play basketball at school.

"You can go to hell if you want, but I'm not," I would reply. The strange thing about my behavior was my parents never believed or taught me that. Pappy never actually told me that directly. However, he would manipulate my thinking by reading the Old Testament verses warning against women wearing things that were the likeness of a man's clothes. Eventually, I realized that men in the Bible wore dresses like the women, so something was wrong with my thinking. My dogma didn't drive me away from religion like it would have many. Instead, it made me a student of theology. It pushed me to examine *why* people believe what they believe.

Pappy tried to convince me that it was a sin to wear makeup or to watch television. These are not the teachings of either the Free Will Baptist that he pastored under nor the beliefs of the Assemblies of God. However, it was his own personal, religious doctrine.

"Jezebel, the most wicked woman in the Bible, got killed by wild dogs because she wore make-up," he informed me when I was a child.

It took me a few years to get to the book of the Bible she was featured in. I discovered that Jezebel *was* the most wicked women in the Bible but *not* because she wore make-up. It was because she was a murderer, who had ordered the death of all God's prophets. Pappy's manipulation didn't scar me, but it fashioned me into a person who researched things and never

blindly followed anyone's doctrine. I see the truth for myself, and I work to have a strong foundation that is centered around both reason and faith.

When dad would say, "It's wrong for a man to wear an earring," I would counter with Bible research.

"Dad did you know that Moses and Joseph were raised Egyptian? Egyptian men, especially those raised in royalty, not only wore earrings but nose rings and eye make-up," I shared. Dad had no reply.

"Dad, did you know that Jesus has a tattoo?" I said shortly after hearing a lecture on the evils of tattoos and body piercings.

"That's ridiculous, Amy Jo," he said.

"In Revelations, it says that written on his thigh is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. What is a tattoo but handwriting on the skin? And Isaiah says that God has us written on the palm of his hand. If you're going to be literal about the entire Bible, you got to be literal about *every* part of it," I told him.

Although my passion for church was about my love of Jesus, it was also a way for me to counter that rigid dogma that I was fed by the men in my life. Dad was a logical thinker, pure logos in his reasoning, so if I spoke to him in his language, he listened. He was reasonable at times. Other times, though, I banged my head against his control and refusal to listen.

When I wasn't studying the Bible at church, I was involved in activities at the church. My entire life until I began working my first job mostly centered around my church. I was in my first play as Mary as a nine or ten-year-old. I did it several times until they finally got someone to tell a non-traditional Christmas story, and I played the lead in that too. Memorizing a copious amount of lines was not difficult for me, and my loud mouth finally had a positive outlet. These

early experiences at church shaped my junior high and high school years, though, as I pursued theatre and eventually competitive speech and drama. At church, I wrote drama monologues that I would perform. Sometimes, I was requested to perform at youth rallies, but writing plays or dramas wasn't anything I did after the age of sixteen. I was a state qualifier in original oratory my senior year of high school, which was where a student wrote and performed their own speech. I was better at speaking than acting, so I was never a serious actor.

Yet the unique individuals that make up the drama world filled all my high school years. High school was a fun experience for me, and I was constantly performing, competing, or writing. Then my junior year, I discovered Mock Trial, which is a form of acting with more intellect required. It was another thing that fit me better than acting. My best friend Lisa, who always had the leads in our plays, was a star witness in Mock Trial while I was a winning closing attorney. Being an attorney had been my goal from an early age, so Mock Trial was the perfect avenue to explore my talent.

However, when I began school at Oklahoma State, the desire totally fizzled. I realized that I wasn't studious enough to survive the rigors of law school. To my family, I was brilliant, but the reality is I was above average at a mediocre public school. I never had to study in high school and easily achieved A's in everything until my senior year of chemistry when I earned a B. This meant that if I had a science class at OSU that required studying, I failed it. I failed three classes my first two years of college until I found a professor that was amusing and inspired me to learn more.

When I had to decide after my sophomore year what I would do besides become a lawyer, my dad suggested Hotel and Restaurant Management. Oklahoma State did have a strong program in that field. I had become a shift leader at Taco Mayo my senior year of high school

and was an assistant manager of Stillwater's extremely high-volume Arby's. Because I excelled at doing several things at once, fast food was a lot of fun for me. I loved meeting people and making them happy and balancing the dozen things a manager had to do. However, I didn't like the business side of things—the people side was all I cared about. Sometimes, I think my dad had a good point, though, because hotel management and traveling to various places would have fit my personality quite well.

When I contemplated what I was passionate about, there were only two things that really stuck out: books and people. I loved to read more than I loved doing any single activity. This passion of mine began with Bible reading, but it never stopped with that. In fact, the Bible was the only piece of non-fiction that I could stand to read unless forced to. Stories and fiction were my absolute favorite thing. In eighth and ninth grade, I was a library assistant. The librarian soon learned to make me shelve only non-fiction books because I had to read the back of every single fiction book I shelved and never got anything done. I normally would read two to three books a day during those two years. Often, I could finish two books during the school day and always at least one. This is not a commentary on my reading as much as how much wasted instructional time was spent on discipline and other incidental things in school. I spent lunch hours with my friends, talking. No one would see me in the corner reading a book by myself. I was always surrounded by people, so I was this strange contradiction. I was a bookworm trapped in an extrovert's body.

“I hate when you read! You're no fun!” friends would complain. In my English classes, then, I read less than in any class because my friends would demand my attention.

I was and am an incredible reader. Even though I was never the smartest in my Honors English classes, I was always the fastest reader. This skill has only increased as I grew older,

and today I read nearly six hundred words a minute. It's a strange skill to have. I'm not a speed reader because I am not skimming the pages, although I could do that if I wanted. I just read extremely fast. This is probably why I've been able to work so much during my academic studies. It doesn't take me as long to get through reading materials as some. The downside, though, is I am not a critical reader. Since my skill was honed as I read for pleasure only, I never learned to develop a critical eye for detail. This is why I enjoy graduate classes so much. It forces me to read things slower with a more discerning eye. Sometimes, I think that if I could afford it, I'd go to school forever.

My philosophy for life is one that spills over into all parts of my world: I never want to be satisfied with where I am. I always want to be doing more, learning more, and just being the best version I can be of myself. When things get in the way of that, I change something. It never upsets me to change a major thing in my life. Unlike most people, I love change and new experiences. I have moved so many places and had so many roommates and jobs over the years. At forty years of age, I don't have the husband and home that most in America with my education level have. Often, I am distracted by my family or other passions in my life. Yet I always get back on track. It took me seven years to finish my first degree because I was in love with working more than school.

Idleness is hard for me. This is a product of my upbringing because hard work was ingrained in me. Growing up, if I wasn't babysitting or doing housework, I was working in our very large garden. Oklahoma summers are so hot and humid that I developed a real dislike for country living and nature because of these experiences. I don't eat green things either due to the torturous hours spent weeding the green beans (Dad's favorite vegetable), picking them, and shelling them. Because my dad played at being a farmer, I was often forced to do gross chores

like milking the goat or collecting eggs. This means I have no strong love of animals and see most the way a farmer would—they should be treated humanely because only a sadist harms defenseless creatures. However, I don't get worked up on the behalf of animal rights or obsess over my cute dog or cat. As I grew up, too many adored cats were killed by dogs, brothers, or bobcats, so I don't care much for pets.

Today, not a single sibling has a pet. My older brother Jason had an outdoor dog for a while for his kids. His daughter Aurora fed every cat on his block, so cats were always in their yard. None were ever allowed inside the doors, though. Kelly probably loved animals the most, and she used to always have a cat. Sherry has a dog named Sheppard, who she got for Emily and Eli. Sometimes Sheppard is my dog. I took him from her when he was a puppy because she was hurting him when he destroyed her house.

“Don't leave a puppy unattended in your house for twenty-four hours! He's a puppy, which is like a toddler. It's your fault, not his,” I yelled when I saw her spanking the dog too hard after the fact. “It's not like he knows why you're hitting him. He did this hours ago.” I kept the dog for several months and made him an outdoor dog. Although I loved Sheppard, I wasn't attached to him.

I like dogs a lot, but I think it's dirty to have dogs inside a house, especially big dogs. They're not clean animals, and who wants to bathe a dog every few days? I sure don't. Cats are much cleaner and self-sufficient. At my age, though, I don't want to clean up cat litter boxes or have cat hair on everything. It's annoying. My mother, though, has become one of those obsessive dog lovers in her life after her marriage to my dad and happily bathes her dog twice a week. It's another puzzling thing about my mother that I do not understand because it's not something I can relate to.

My childhood was challenging at times because as the oldest I had a lot of responsibilities. This made me a very independent and capable adult, so I'm not looking for a man to rescue me. I enjoy my own company and doing my own thing. I don't very feel lonely because I always have stories in my head that keep me occupied. In my late twenties, I was finally able to put down a book long enough to write.

Although I am a type A personality, I'm don't stress out over my decisions and often make up my mind quickly. When it came time to pick a college, I knew that I wanted to go anyplace but the University of Oklahoma since my hometown was five miles away from campus. My best friend Lisa was going to Oklahoma State, ninety miles away, so I decided I would go there. I didn't know a single thing about the school, but I made the decision and never wavered in it. Once my mind is made up, I never suffer from indecision or second-guessing. The years I spent there were the best years of my life.

It is extremely easy for me to make major life changes if I feel the need. No one but me is responsible for my happiness, so I moved to Nags Head, North Carolina a few months after graduating from OSU with my cousin Michele in 2003. It was fun for a few months but living on an island chain made me feel claustrophobic. Then I moved in with Aunt Inez and Uncle Mark in Eastern Kentucky for four months or so. However, the peaceful mountains made me crazy after a while. Living in the mountains so far from even the library (forty-five minutes away) or even a Wal-Mart was too hard for me. Tedium had me reading Aunt Inez's massive book collection, and I read about three books a day during those four months. Eventually, the boredom drove me out of the mountains.

Chicago was always a city that I wanted to go to, and I had talked about it for a few years before graduating. I wanted to live and experience a truly big city, but neither New York or Los

Angeles really appealed to me. In 2004, I decided not to be one of those people that only talked about the things they wanted to do, and I just went. While there, I did get my first graduate degree in teaching secondary education, so it seemed to serve a practical purpose as well as a personal wish fulfillment. I had such a great time there, and I made some amazing friends that I still visit to this day. However, the extreme winters eventually defeated me, so I moved back to Oklahoma in the spring of 2009.

I'm not sure where my next great adventure will take me, but I look forward to finding out.

Chapter 8: Timmy

Every person has someone that they knew as a child that made their life more difficult. I was never bullied at school, nor did I have an angry ex or mean girl issues in junior high or high school. However, I had my brother Timmy, who is three years younger than me and still causes a headache to anyone that comes into contact with him. My earliest memory of Timmy inflicting me with physical pain was when he was three, and I was six. He was throwing some metal part on top of the roof—probably to see if he could get it to stay on the roof. Unfortunately, it was my bad luck to be standing under the edge of the roof. That was the first time I was physically hurt by a sibling. Of course, this occurrence was a complete accident. He didn't mean to hurt me—it was an unfortunate event that didn't even leave a scar on my head. However, it is one of my earliest memories of him.

Timmy was born with a cyst on his side that grew as large as a grapefruit. Because of its existence, my parents handled him with kid gloves until it was removed when he was a toddler. My aunts and uncles told me that they never disciplined him as a baby and allowed him to run wild. However, my mother denies that, insisting she did lightly spank him. Although I don't remember my mother ever doing so, I just know that he was an extremely hyper child. I remember when we lived in Oklahoma City, and my mother would try in vain to reign him in.

“Mama, why is Timmy so bad?” my six-year-old self asked her.

“I think he’s demon possessed,” she said to me once. I thought she was joking at the time, but her claim still shocked me.

Another time, I heard her tell my dad, “I need valium, or he does. Something isn’t right with him! He never minds anything I say!” It was a never-ending struggle for my overworked mother. Growing up, I would always hear shouts and running as Mother would chase Timmy

around the house, trying to disarm him most of the time since he loved throwing whatever object he could get his hands on—shoes, toys, even the television remote. When I was older, that job became mine and Jason's, my older brother.

It wasn't until Timmy's kindergarten hearing test that we discovered why he never listened—he couldn't. He was fifty percent deaf due to nerve deafness. No one knows really what causes nerve deafness. My parents speculated that it was the surgery, believing that anesthesia could cause harm as the doctor said it was a very minor chance. Mother insists that he heard just fine when he was a baby—we will never know for sure. Sadly, there is no cure for nerve deafness. According to his first audiologist, it would progressively get worse, and Timmy was fitted with two hearing aids at age five. Because of this physical handicap, his life was never easy. Today, he has a hearing loss of over eighty percent, which qualifies him for the legally deaf status. However, he doesn't sign, nor is he part of the Deaf Community. His life would've been so much easier and better if he had been willing to embrace his handicap and gotten support from the Deaf Community. Instead, he had to be the first Hard of Hearing student in Noble, my small hometown. Most people don't know how to speak to people with this type of disability. They believe that his hearing aids work like glasses, making him hear perfectly when they mostly just amplify background noise. He reads lips very well—much better than the average deaf person you would encounter. When he cannot follow spoken directions, many wrongfully assume that something is wrong with his intelligence. That is a label he fights constantly; many times, insults to his IQ led to physical fights.

No one in my family except for Pappy could ever deal well with Timmy. My dad wanted him to be normal and pretended that he was. For instance, he even fought the school system who tried to label Timmy as learning disabled. My dad lost, and Timmy was tested anyway. Just as

my father had argued, Timmy was not learning disabled, only hearing disabled. The school, however, was forced to accommodate his hearing loss. It was a constant battle because Timmy was bullied and harassed every school year. In fact, fights in school often ended in Timmy's suspension. Most of his struggles, I wasn't around for. I had begun working at Taco Mayo my junior year. Between my job and my many school activities, I was rarely home. Although Timmy was only three years younger than I, he was four grades behind me in school. After my senior year, I was away at college and never saw his struggles first hand.

Once when Timmy was in the eighth grade, I was in my freshmen year at Oklahoma State in Stillwater. My parents lived for two years in Lexington, Oklahoma as my dad worked to get some new land of his developed. Lexington Public Schools was a horrible experience for Timmy. The harassment from other middle school kids reached a new high. By the spring semester, the principal called my dad for a meeting.

"Timmy is expelled for fighting," the principal said.

"What happened?" Dad asked.

"He hit two other boys," the principal said.

"Why?" Dad inquired. "Timmy wouldn't have hit them if they weren't making fun of him or harassing him."

"He says they were calling him names, making fun of his hearing aids," the principal admitted.

"Are those boys in trouble?" Dad asked.

"No, they didn't hit Timmy," the principal said as if that excused his actions in punishing only Timmy.

Dad stood up and put his hands on the desk, peering angrily down at the principal. "Suspend Timmy for fighting if he was fighting. That doesn't bother me. You allow boys to pick on him and torment him, and they get in no trouble, then you and I are going to have a real problem!" Dad told him.

When he recounted this story to me later, he told me that he had never been so close to hitting a school official before. Although I insisted that Timmy shouldn't have been suspended at all, Dad didn't care if Timmy was suspended since Timmy did get violent. The unfairness of the other boys receiving no consequences pushed my dad too far. This event was in the 90's when there wasn't the spotlight or media attention on bullying that we see today. People didn't really understand the real psychological damage bullying could do, nor did they foresee events like Columbine happening as a result of bullying. I would hope that today a child that was like Timmy would face a totally different, improved environment.

In an attempt to pacify my father, the boys received a three-day suspension to Timmy's week. As soon as he could, Dad got Timmy and the younger siblings back in Noble schools.

Since this even happened when I was already grown and out of the house, I didn't get to see the immediate effect it had on my younger brother. However, we grew up in the same household, and I saw plenty of things that I know contributed to the problem child he was and the troubled teen he later became. In fact, I remain convinced that many factors—primarily how he was treated—caused him to be the dysfunctional adult he is now. Between my brother Jason and cousin Nicky, Timmy was bullied and picked on without relief. As I already alluded to, school was even worse for him. In turn, he tried to pick on me and my sisters, the only outlet for his rage. He and Jason broke nearly every window in our house with their rough play. I lost count of how many fights I had to break up and shoes I had to dodge.

How did I deal with this angry, bully version of Timmy? Well, I treated Timmy like you should treat any bully—I ignored him. If he punched me, I rolled my eyes and walked away. Fortunately, he never hit me twice. Once, though, he caught me on a bad day. I was sixteen, and he was thirteen. Unprovoked, he walked by and punched me in the arm, so I turned around and kicked him between the legs.

“Touch me again, and you won’t be able to have children!” I threatened.

Happily, I believe my threat and actions worked. During my last two years of high school, he never hit me or tried to hit me.

Although Timmy saved his violence for my younger siblings at the house, he used psychological warfare on me. For instance, he used to graphically tell me how he would kill me one day.

“When I turn eighteen, I’m going to kill you and cut you up in little pieces!” he warned.

I can only speculate on why Timmy chose this particular threat since I am the only witness of it. It was just the threat he most often said to me when we were growing up. Of course, the graphic, sadistic nature of the threat was particularly disturbing. Maybe he heard it from a movie? Maybe he actually fantasized killing? I don’t actually know. It’s better to think it was just a phase, and if I asked him today, he would have no memory of saying that. However, I have never ventured to ask him—I don’t think I want to know what he might say.

Because Timmy was so erratic growing up, a part of me believed his threats. My belief that he would one day try to kill me was so strong that I told all my friends in high school that if I ended up dead that Timmy would have killed me. His threats were so convincing that I used to worry that he would snap and kill my entire family. Occasionally, I still worry about that since he’s threatened to do it as an adult. In fact, it’s not even been a year since the last time he

threatened to kill me and burn my house down. Of course, he was high on drugs at the time. (His threats as an adult no longer involve cutting people up but the burning down of houses). Mostly, he is like a true bully, full of hot air. Ironically, he wasn't the brother that tried to kill me.

Growing up, I never spent time contemplating the *why* behind Timmy's ugly behavior. I never felt sympathy for him or spent much of my compassion on him. Like most teenagers, I was concerned more with myself and how he ruined my day or my good mood. Once when I was twelve or thirteen, I got a five-day reprieve from him when he went to church camp. The week he was gone was a peaceful one in our household. By the third day, though, my father was mourning his absence.

"I sure miss Timbo," Dad said, looking around as if hoping he'd turn up.

"Really?" I asked in surprise. "Why? He's awful! Always bothering someone, never listening, being mean. This is the best week of my life!"

"Well, I miss him," Dad insisted.

"Why? You have five other kids," I said, confused by his response.

I will never forget his reply since it shut me up, making a deep impression: "Cut off one of your fingers and see if you miss it."

Now as I attempt to understand his past and present behaviors, I try to label him. Is Timmy a hillbilly or redneck? Sometimes, I feel like it's obvious as the hillbilly blood reigns supreme, and he shows me cruelty or ugly words come out of his mouth. Strangely, however, he's fiercely protective of his family—only he is allowed to abuse us. Not too long ago, we were together, and a man I have a passing acquaintance with spoke rudely to me. I don't know if Timmy actually heard the man's words, but he could tell by the man's tone and body language that he was being rude to me. Timmy stepped forward to attack the man on my behalf. Even

though he and I, as adults, have nothing in common and barely tolerate one another, he was prepared to defend me to another man. More than once, he has actually fought our sister Kelly's boyfriends when they were mean to her. Paradoxically, he is both our greatest defender and biggest tormentor.

As an adult, he has been the most dysfunctional member of my family. None of his experiences growing up equipped him to deal well with adulthood. Consequently, he's been arrested countless times for not paying a traffic ticket that is around two decades too old. His license was suspended around age twenty for this. Naturally, this made getting to court dates problematic. If you ignore any type of ticket, you are then charged with a failure to appear. I tried once a few years ago to keep track of his arrests in a calendar year, but by May, I had lost count. Most of the time, his arrests are for dumb reasons like an outstanding warrant for failure to appear for misdemeanors.

Once, he was in a car with a female friend late at night. The Noble cop pulled them over because the girl was driving erratically. Timmy threw something out the window. The cop suspected it was drugs—it was not found. However, they did find a crack pipe under his seat, so he was charged for possession of drug paraphernalia. The driver, who had no record at all, wasn't charged. Instead, they chose her as a witness against Timmy, assuming that she would be more credible.

I went to court worried that Timmy might be taken advantage of, or that I might need to speak to him if he had trouble following the judge. Although the city attorney in Noble tried to get him to take a plea agreement, he refused. Then, his judge spoke loudly and clearly so that Timmy could easily follow. I will never forget Timmy's statement to the judge.

"Not my car. Not my crack pipe," he stated.

"Do you have any idea how it got in the car?"

"No," he said without further explanation.

The judge looked at the city attorney and said, "Do you have any proof that the pipe is his besides the statement of the owner of the car, who was in the car with him at the time?"

"No."

"Then I find him not guilty," the judge said. "Case dismissed."

A redneck never fears the court system and enjoys minor fits of rebellion, and a hillbilly will prove to be too stubborn to admit their mistakes.

Timmy's fearless courtroom scene amused me up because I never thought he could be so composed and articulate. It was the first time I had ever seen him so. What made it so funny was that everyone who knew Timmy knew that the crack pipe probably *was* his, or he had been the one last smoking it. He tended to do whatever anyone he was with was doing. That means that the girl who was driving probably bought the crack pipe, but Timmy was smoking the drugs with her. Normally, if the people he was with were sober, he was sober. If they weren't, he wasn't. His childhood fashioned him into a lonely soul, so he longed to belong to any group that would have him. Unfortunately, it was usually the outcasts and misfits that accepted him. Normally, they would take advantage of him by pretending to be his friend until his money ran out. Then it was up to the family to take him in for a month or two. This has been a recurring cycle in his adult life. We've all taken turns taking him in when he is once again homeless. It's exhausting, especially when he refuses to change or to listen. Does that make him more of a hillbilly?

I believe that Timmy is more redneck than hillbilly overall, yet I can see the mixing of the two. Sometimes, he acts cruel with his words, but his actions are rarely that. He loves animals and has never abused any growing up. Contrarily, he will proclaim he hates cats and

only loves dogs, yet he seeks out cats to pet anytime anyone has one. A few years ago, he was lonely and asked to borrow my cat Snowball, who was both an indoor and outdoor cat. When Snowball would stay outside playing too long, Timmy would stand outside calling him for hours. Once, he told me he was up all-night listening for Snowball to scratch on the door. Because he couldn't sleep with his hearing aids on, he opted to stay up listening, rather than sleep and miss the cat's cries to be let in. This tender nature could be seen in how he would interact with any elderly neighbor. He would spend hours listening to an old man, hungry for company, talk even if he didn't actually understand anything the old man said. Timmy would smile and give the elder the companionship he seeks.

However, the violent streak comes out unexpectedly. When it appears, I see it as evidence of the hillbilly blood. As I mentioned earlier, hillbilly men have a violent, cruel streak that I don't think comes naturally to rednecks.

Once at my youngest sister Sherry's graduation, he was outside on Aunt Inez's porch with my sisters, Sherry and Kelly. I went out to check the weather.

"It looks like rain," I said, looking up at the sky.

Suddenly, he jumped over and punched me in the face.

I would wonder what prompted his actions, but with Timmy, rational behavior cannot always be expected.

Kelly attacked him for attacking me, and the fight was on. When Kelly's boyfriend later asked him why he hit me, he shrugged.

"I don't know. Amy just bugs me sometimes," he said.

In his head, he thought I said something bad to him—something I never did. Unlike so many others, I never wasted energy provoking Timmy or insulting him. It just wasn't the way I

dealt with people. As I teen, I spent an inordinate amount of time studying the book of *Proverbs*, trying to learn to control my mouth and hot-tempered nature. "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger," is one proverb that has stayed with me. Trying to fight back verbally when Timmy gets an idea in his head, only leads to more violence and chaos. Between his real hearing loss and the years of abuse, he suffers from serious paranoia at times. As an adult, this causes major conflicts. Property damage and fights are often the results. Many times, the only way to get him to back down once he gets an idea in his head is to call the police. I never press charges or retaliate because I know he is a broken person that I cannot fix. He breaks my heart, but he is a burden I can no longer take on—he is too much. His pain is too much. His brokenness is too much.

In the past, I have tried. About five or six years ago, for example, I was in charge of his Social Security check. That meant for a solid year, I made sure he had a place to live and managed all his affairs, including taking him to various doctor's appointments and shopping whenever he needed. For my trouble, I took no fee, not even charging him gas money. For a solid year, he had no legal troubles and had a place to live. However, he grew weary of my control and chafed under the restrictions I gave him, demanding more spending money—money he did not have unless I paid less on his fines. Eventually, he and my mother plotted behind my back, and she became his power of attorney, overdrawing his checking out and moving him out of the state. This was another trip to Kentucky that lasted less than a year. My mother, in turn, promptly handed him his bank card, giving him back control. He was homeless again twice in Kentucky before going to Chicago and living on the streets there. The cycle continued.

At age thirty-seven, he still faces discrimination. In fact, last summer he has been protesting a new arrest in Kentucky.

"Amy, I called the cops on my friend because he stole my wallet that had forty dollars in it, and they came and arrested me! That's bullshit!" he complained angrily.

"Were you being belligerent? Were you drunk?" I asked.

"No. The cop kept asking me things that I couldn't understand. He got mad at me for not understanding him. I told him I was deaf and couldn't hear, but he still arrested me. Now I have three charges," he shared. The handicapped are often helpless in the face of unwarranted discrimination. The recent Oklahoma City shooting of a deaf man in his own yard by a police officer, who misunderstood his deafness for noncompliance is no surprise to me or my family.

A friend said she'd type up a letter to the local newspaper. Timmy sent me a picture of his letter. This is what it said:

I am a deaf/hearing impaired man that lives in Floyd County, Kentucky. I feel like I have been discriminated against by local Floyd County Sheriff and Police department. Not all Deaf people are mute, just because I can speak and read lips does not mean an officer is allowed to violate my rights. I mumble because I am Deaf. Not understanding their speech because I couldn't hear, does not give a lazy officer a right to bully me or penalize me. Officers made false reports and false arrest and charged me with 3 charges I never committed. Floyd county needs to take action against issues like this.

Even though every so often he has shown me how articulate he can be, I was still surprised by his writing. Although he never made it passed the eleventh grade, he could still express himself well in writing—the only skill we have in common.

I wish I could say that this was his first bad experience with police officers. Many times, he brings it on himself. However, there have been more than one incident of real discrimination

from both Purcell cops and the Cleveland County Sheriff department in Oklahoma. In fact, Judge Tupper, a Cleveland County judge, has gotten so sick of seeing Timmy for the same stupid two-decade old fines that two years ago, he moved them to civil court. This means police officers can no longer arrest him for not paying his fines, but the county can try to sue him. He moved to Kentucky without any active warrants in Cleveland County.

Of course, this reprieve doesn't mean that Timmy stops breaking the law or making foolish choices. He is too trusting and too angry to ever live a life of peace. I wish he'd find peace and happiness, but it seems to escape him. The things that are wrong inside of him seem destined to never be fixed.

Who broke him? My mom blames my dad. My dad blames Timmy's physical problems. I think it's a combination of the schoolyard bullying and the influence of family members who tormented him growing up, combined with his real hearing loss. When he left home at eighteen, he walked down the destructive path of drug and alcohol abuse to cope with his demons. Those demons now are his chief tormentors. The cycle never stops. The various sides of his nature war for dominance. It remains to be seen which side will win.

Chapter 9: Kelly

I was three months from my sixth birthday when my first sister was born. Kelly was born January 4, 1983 in Oklahoma City. She was named Kelly Ann and came in over seven pounds even though the doctors kept telling Mom that she would be severely underweight. One reason that I remember the day she was born so well is because it is the first time my mother ever slapped me—one of two times I remember clearly.

I was very excited to have a sister since I only had two brothers. Although Jason was good to me, Timmy was the bane of my existence. Having a sister finally was a good thing. When Aunt Linda took me to the hospital to see her, she was lying in the hospital bassinet that they wheeled in and out of hospital rooms. Kelly was born before my cousin Shantelle, so she was the first newborn I had seen. I was only three when Timmy was born and have no memories of him as a newborn. Kelly was a small, pale baby, wrapped in a pink blanket.

I remember looking down at her with great interest because she was so tiny and so still. I blurted out the first thing that came into my head. "She looks dead to me!" I announced.

My normally pacifist mother actually struck me. The shock of it hurt me more than the sting of the slap. Once as an adult, I mentioned this scene to my mother, and her excuse was that she'd just given birth, and I told her that her baby looked dead. I still feel it was an overreaction on her part—I was not quite six. However, I know pregnancy hormones can make women very irrational, so I didn't really hold it against her. It did, though, crystalize Kelly's birth in my memories, whereas I can't recall much about Sherry or Joey's birth.

Kelly was a happy, chunky baby. We called her Kelly Belly until she started school. She was never chubby, though, once she hit three. Kelly always had two great loves: the outdoors and Brandon Boykin. Although she was fair-haired, her hair was streaked almost white in the

summer because she was rarely inside. She is the most physically like my mother. My mother, Kelly, and I all have the same blue eyes, somewhat large nose. My mother, though, has dark brown hair. The Click side of the family tends to have lighter haired children. Kelly's has always been the blondest looking due to her sun streaks. Both have wavy hair. On Mother, the hair is frizzy. On Kelly, it is curly like Sherry's. Neither Kelly or Sherry learned how to care for curly hair until they were nearly adults. For some reason, I'm the only one with straight hair. My mother has always had that perfect olive complexion—she never had acne as a teen. Kelly was a bit lighter skin, but she inherited her model-shaped cheeks and perfect complexion. I, on the other hand, had both freckles and acne. Kelly towers over our mother at five feet nine, while I'm an inch taller than she. Unlike me, Kelly has never struggled with weight issues. She was a pretty child. As a teenager and adult, however, she is breathtakingly beautiful. Easily, the most attractive member of my entire family—on both sides.

The saying that beautiful women have more issues, though, is very true. No one in my immediate family—myself included—has more natural gifts than Kelly. Nor has anyone squandered those gifts as much as my middle sister. Both my sisters have a special place in my heart, but Kelly's place hurts the most. When she was a baby, I adored her and was eager to learn how to change her diapers and care for her. I recall packing her around everywhere. Unfortunately, I spoiled her, and she'd scream anytime I wasn't packing her around. That was mistake I never made with Sherry and Joey. It was my job to care for her as early as age eight. I recall vividly taking care of her after school when I was in second grade until my dad came home at six after school. My mother went to work at three, not returning until after eleven. Grandpa watched her alone for a half hour or so until I got home from school. When bedtime rolled

around, she slept with me and not dad. Dad's caring was strictly in a supervisory capacity since I did all the chasing after, diaper changing, and even feeding when my mother was not around.

Kelly was the daring one in the family. If I had a word to describe her, it'd be fearless. She is the only sibling that I recall having true admiration and pride in. When she was six, I knew I would spend a life time worrying about her. That was the first time she jumped off the top of the garage. Somehow, she's never broken a bone or even gotten stitches with her daring. Her bravery comes from both influences: hillbilly and redneck.

Kelly got into most of her misadventures with our brother Timmy. The earliest one I can recall is when I was twelve. I stepped outside and found Kelly hanging by a rope that was wrapped around her neck. Timmy was holding onto her legs to keep her neck from snapping. Kelly was six and Timmy nine when this incident occurred.

I took in the scene in horror.

"What the heck are you guys doing?" I yelled, moving to grab Kelly and removed the noose from around her neck. Our front porch had this long wooden beam across it, which made it good to hang plants or a porch swing. It was *not* meant to sport a rope for my siblings to hang from. When I took the rope off her neck, I saw that her neck was red with rope burn.

"We were acting out the movie we saw last night," Timmy said.

I looked and saw several glass bottles with paper hanging out of them, meant to duplicate the scene where the man lit a bottle and threw it to blow up a building or something. In the movie, someone had committed suicide by hanging. Now up until this very moment, I never believed that watching violent, R-rated movies was harmful to kids because Dad let me watch them. I just turned my head if they showed nudity or sex. Since I wasn't violent, nor did I use

profanity, I never believed it when people said young people shouldn't watch R-rated movies. After that day, I became a believer.

"You're lucky, Kelly didn't break her neck!" I scolded, moving to take down the rope.

"Amy, you can't take down the rope!" Timmy protested.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because it's my turn to hang!" he countered.

I just shook my head, hiding the rope so they couldn't try it again. This, I'm sure, was not the only time the two of them survived brushes with death. Kelly was a tomboy determined to keep up with the boys, and Timmy was determined to not be outdone by his younger, more gifted sister.

We had a family at our church that had two sons, Brandon and Brent Boykin. They were the grandsons of our pastors. Anita Boykin was their mother. Kelly was three when Brandon was adopted by Anita and her husband Don. Brandon was an adorable, active boy and the same age as Kelly. Timmy was three years older, but Brandon always handled our difficult, hard of hearing brother so well. His Aunt Marsha, who always went to our church, taught ASL and was the hard of hearing consultant for all the surrounding schools. This meant the three children spent a lot of time together. Kelly never liked another boy besides Brandon until she was fifteen. The three of them were inseparable.

That didn't mean that Kelly and Timmy didn't fight. In fact, they fought more than any of my siblings. Whereas I would ignore Timmy if he hit me, Kelly would come back swinging every time. It didn't matter how many times Timmy hurt her, she would *always* hit him back. I always admired her spirit even as I advised her to ignore Timmy, and he'd leave her alone—she refused. Kelly was a fighter, never letting girls at school or brothers at home treat her badly. As

the middle child, I know she tried hard to stand out. I was an excellent student in a small town, so we had the same teachers. Not only did many of them call her by *my* name, too many times did she hear, "Why can't you be like Amy?"

I never wanted her to be like me—I admired her for being so different. I did worry about her because she was never content. As a talented athlete, she was on the fringe of the popular girls at school. We were too poor for her to ever be completely in their clique. However, Kelly was too pretty and too talented to be ignored. She started as a cross-country runner in seventh grade when we moved to Lexington for a year. Although I commuted to Noble to finish my senior year, Kelly and Timmy enrolled in Lexington schools. Kelly's experience was the total opposite of Timmy's. She had a coach who loved her so much that he literally cried when she left. He actually tried to convince my parents to let her live with him, so she could continue to train under him. She was ranked in the top twenty cross-country runners in the state in the first year she tried the sport. It was sport she did every year even though her love of basketball eventually eclipsed her love of running.

Kelly played soccer and volleyball in high school as well as track and field, basketball, and cross-country. Now I realize she was undiagnosed ADHD. She could never sit still for long nor stop talking. Because of her vivacious and outgoing nature, however, she rarely got into trouble. When she was twenty-one, she came to see me in Chicago once. My friend Nick met her at Union Station because I had to work when she was scheduled to arrive.

Later, Nick laughingly told me, "I could tell she was your sister. She made a friend with someone who bought her lunch and gave her \$20." I'm an outgoing person who spent grades seven to twelve on stage in drama, performing. Kelly, however, is one of those extroverts who thrive on people and being center of attention. This means she makes a great first impression

and easily convinces people she is trust worthy and honest. Back when she used to be those things, it was not a big deal—it was who she was.

Kelly has a compassionate nature and an empathetic spirit. One that rebelled strongly at my dad's strict Puritan-like upbringing. Although my dad was less strict with her than he had been with me, she constantly fought against him. I was sixteen before I was allowed to go to parties with boys or anywhere without my brother Jason. I couldn't even go to the library after school that was two blocks from school until I was fifteen. Kelly, on the other hand, got to go to parties at age twelve. All Kelly could see, though, was how much more her friends had or how much more her friends could do.

She was fifteen when she ran away from home for the first time. By the time she was sixteen, she was living with me in Waxahachie, Texas where I was going to school at the time. I wanted to be there for her—I tried my best. However, once she discovered boys there was no stopping her. Finally, moving on from Brandon (who only saw her as a friend), she fell in love with this really nice guy named Brian, who she was with for four years. When I left Texas, Kelly went with me back to Stillwater. However, she only stayed a few weeks before running back to Texas to be with Brian and his parents. My parents and I let her go. I realized that I was her sibling, not her parent. She was going to do what she was going to do—there was nothing I could do to stop her.

She stayed in Texas with Brian for four years. The man adored her so much he worked two jobs just so she could drive nice cars. Unfortunately, she didn't graduate high school due to a disagreement with her basketball coach, but she did obtain her GED. Her relationship with Brian ended when he grew suspicious and jealous of her ongoing friendship with Brandon. The

family rumor mill and my own conversation with Brian said she cheated on him with Brandon. It's something, though, she denies to this day.

Kelly came back to Oklahoma at age twenty. I took her in once again, but then I decided to leave Oklahoma and accompany my cousin Michele to the Outer Banks, North Carolina. Before I left, Kelly met Bryon, the guy who would be her on-again-off-again boyfriend for the next year or so. She fell hard for him, and I was concerned.

"Kelly, you just got out of a four-year relationship. You've been single two months. Don't you think you should take your time before dating seriously again?" I advised her.

"I love Bryon, Amy," she insisted.

I didn't realize then that Kelly has a desperate need to be loved, to feel love. She is forever seeking love. Unfortunately, she is like the cliché—seeking it in the wrong places. Byron ended up being a wrong place. I think she finally had enough of him after he cheated on her repeatedly. Then there was Jeremy, Jake (her sons' father), Shawn, Matt, Eric, Bobbie, Zack, and Adam. Sadly, Kelly is incapable of being single. I am convinced this is why she cannot manage to stay sober. Those that turn to drugs or alcohol are trying to fill an emptiness inside or to feel better about themselves. Relationships can often do the same thing. However, I believe if you aren't whole on your own, you can't ever be one half of a happy couple.

Her relationship with Eli and Luke's dad, Jake, has been one of violence and ugliness. My nephew has been exposed to many awful things. The past year and a half, he has stayed during school days with me or my dad. He sees his parents on the weekends. Kelly says she wants to change, but she cannot seem to stay away from drugs, having given up alcohol for the most part and replacing it with something far worse, crystal meth. Today, she is a shadow of the

woman she used to be. She's not held a steady job since Elijah was three, so it's up to me or other family members to step in for Eli.

Eli's brother, Luke, was born in 2015. The only reason he was born was because a judge in Norman ordered her drug tested when she was in her first trimester. She tested positive for meth, so Judge Stice ordered her to spend a year in Cleveland County jail. It was a miserable, horrific experience for her. However, after four months, they allowed her to go to a rehab facility in McAlister that accepted children. During this time, Eli lived with his dad full-time for the first time in his life. The rehab was a good thing for Kelly. She gave birth to a healthy baby, and she came out sober and talking sense again.

For a short time, we had my sister back. She even got her own apartment and a job. Unfortunately, she couldn't stay single or sober. The past year or so has been a repeat of the previous years except Jake now has primary care of Luke.

My beautiful sister, so full of life and promise is a broken mirror. She keeps trying to glue the pieces back together, but the image is never the same.

When I try to make sense of who she is, I see my Aunt Linda. Like Linda, Kelly is gregarious and craves the company of others. Her compassionate heart causes her to help people when she doesn't have the money or stability to do so. Like many rednecks, she is comfortable camping, fishing, using a gun. It is easy to label her a redneck—at least when she's sober. When she's high or under the influence, she is violent and vicious—paranoid and manipulative. Then, her hillbilly blood shines through, reminding me of Pokey and Nanny.

When she is sober, she is funny, appealing, a pleasure to be around. Kelly is one of my first true heartbreaks. Having her run away from me back to Texas when I had done everything I could to keep her happy devastated me. Yet I tried to be supportive, visiting her and talking to

her on the phone. When she wanted to come home four years later, I gave her a safe haven and welcomed her with open arms. Her continual refusal to make good choices, though, has made it hard to face who she is now. Our relationship now is contentious because she resents my influence on Eli even though she has necessitated the need for me to step into a maternal role. This New Year she insists that she will care for Eli. Neither my dad nor I fought her because we know it won't last. If you keep doing the same things, you won't get different results.

I miss my sister—the sister she used to be.

Chapter 10: Sherry

My baby sister Sherry was born Sherry May Click in July of 1986. I don't remember her birth as much as I remember the miscarriage Mom had before she was pregnant with Sherry. I was nine when Sherry was born, and the year before Mom had a miscarriage. Although I don't remember much about the day Sherry was born, I was anxious the entire time my mother was pregnant, worried that she'd lose another baby. I'm not shy about the fact that Sherry is my favorite sibling, the only one I always want to be around. It's not a big deal, though, because Sherry is *everyone's* favorite sibling. She is the only sibling Jason still talks to, and Joey's best friend. She's a second mother to Kelly's children, and the only sibling, Timmy's never actually punched in the face. Sherry is a special person, and this chapter should be easy to write. However, I put it off until last because I doubted my ability to convey exactly how special she is.

When she was born, I laid claim to her in a way that I didn't with Kelly or Joey. For all intents and purposes, she was mine (in my mind). I wisely, though, learned not to carry her around like I did with Kelly. However, I dragged her with me to church long before our church had an established nursery. Sherry was around two or so when I decided we needed to go to church Sunday nights as well as Sunday day, which meant I took all my siblings with me. Dad had a rule about everyone going to church on Sundays even though he and Mom didn't go to church. Dad said he went enough as a kid, but he was supposed to raise us in church. I was fifteen before he started going to Noble Assembly of God, the church Pappy first introduced us to when we moved to Noble when I was in third grade.

Growing up, Sherry had this mop of wild, curly blonde hair that only got combed when she had to leave the house for church or the store. When we would tell her to come to us so we could comb her hair (either my mother or me), her eyes would widen in alarm.

"No!" she'd scream dramatically. Then she would take off running. We had to literally chase her down to comb her hair. It was both funny and frustrating. The dramatics are the reason we didn't comb it daily, but only when we had to. If she wasn't leaving the house, we didn't bother trying—it was too much work.

Because Sherry spent a lot of time with me, she imitated me, and I was a mouthy, opinionated preteen/teen. This meant she was highly verbal. When she'd first began talking, I taught her to say, "I'm Daddy's girl. Mommy's monkey, and Amy's ANIMAL!" Of course, I had her screaming out that last part.

She was really good at mimicking me or adults. Most of the time, it was amusing. Once when she was two or three, I took her to her Sunday school class. Anita Boykin was her teacher. On this one memorable occasion, Anita had told someone to shut the classroom door. When they didn't comply, Sherry put her hand on her hip and ordered, "Shut that *damn* door!" This was a phrase she heard all summer long from my dad as the kids came in and out while the air condition ran.

When this incident occurred, I was about twelve and so embarrassed. Of course, Anita just laughed, amused. This was not the only time I suffered mortification at my baby sister's hand. Because I always dragged her to services when they didn't necessarily have a nursery, she often sat next to me in service. Once, she escaped during the pastor's sermon. I believe she was three or close to it since I was twelve. Naturally, she didn't come to me when I beckoned, but she ran up to the stage where the pastor was. This meant I had to go chasing after her while she thought it was a huge game of tag. As you might imagine, she did not allow me to catch her. Instead, she entertained herself, running all around the stage. I wanted to die because of the humiliation. Mrs. Boykin had to coax her off the stage.

When she was around four, she started mimicking my dad's use of my mother's first name, which I found hilarious. Madeline isn't a common name, and it's not easy for little kids to pronounce. When Sherry started calling her Madeline instead of mom, it was hard not to laugh as she struggled with the pronunciation.

"Mad-ah-lin, the kids are home!" she would yell when we got home from school.

"Mad-ah-lin, the kids won't leave me alone!" she'd complain.

Then she stopped imitating Dad and began picking up words my mother would say. My favorite expression of hers was heard when she'd fart.

"Excuse me," she would say. "I got gas."

She also learned to take her time eating like my mother did. Then she'd go around and finish everyone's leftovers, so she was a cute, chunky, curly-haired little cherub with the wild curls and big hazel eyes.

Because she was such a cute little kid, I had high hopes that school would be a good thing for her. Unfortunately, right before kindergarten or around that time, she developed perthes disease, which is a lack of blood supply to the hip joints. Jason had a mild form of it, but with Sherry, it caused her hip joint to be out of place. This meant she began walking with a limp, and some days she would wake up in agony, unable to move her leg at all. Her screams of pain were a constant sound in our household. If someone has perthes today, they have aggressive blood treatments to prevent what happened to Sherry. Unfortunately, the solution then was to put her legs up in stirrups for a week, hoping the hip joint would go back in—it never did. Eventually, the cartilage between her joints would be completely gone as the two bones would grate together, causing her intense pain. A specialist one time described her hip joint to me this way:

"It's like driving a square tire on a car—it won't ever work right," he said.

Around first grade, she developed a lazy eye that she eventually outgrew, but she had to wear these ugly glasses for several years. So here she was starting school in a small town when she was overweight, walking with a limp and wearing unattractive glasses. She was born at the end of July and should not have started school since she was a young five and immature for her age. However, Dad was a firm believer in going to school at age five, so Sherry went but wasn't prepared for the meanness she encountered. I think it was the bus ride that was worse on her. When she first started, the bus ride was short. I could always shut down the older mean girls on the bus. After I graduated, though, Dad moved the family to way in the country, so the bus ride was very long. They were one of the last to get off. Kelly almost got into a fight once a week taking up for Sherry from bullies.

This fashioned Sherry into a shy, non-confrontational people pleaser. Only her family and a handful of people she has befriended, though, get to see the funny and talented person she really is. She is artistic and creative. I am often amused at when she sits down to do a coloring activity with Eli or Emily. They will finish and be outside playing. An hour later, someone will ask, "Where's Sherry?" I will go look for her and find her still coloring.

Because she is short in stature and always playing with them, the kids think of her as a peer, not an authority figure. Dad often reminisces about a conversation he had with Emily when she was four.

"Who is your best friend?" he asked, expecting her to say that he was her best friend.

Without hesitation, she said, "Sherry." I'm sure she would still say that today.

Sherry has a gift with children. We call her the child whisperer. My dad and I believe she missed her calling, and she should get into child development even if it's just working at a daycare.

When I told her that, she said, "I don't like other people's kids, just the ones related to me."

However, that's not true. I've seen her play just as well with the neighbor kids as she does with Eli, Emily, or Luke. She's a big kid. Unfortunately, driving down the road with her in the backseat with Emily or Eli is as bad as having Eli and Emily only in the back.

"Sherry, stop it!" I yell.

"He started it," she defends.

"You're an adult. Act like it," I tell her.

For two minutes, she will keep her hands to herself and then start tickling her pranking with them. There is a strong sense of *deja vu* whenever this happens because growing up with her and Joey, I had the same *exact* experience. I'd even pull over and whack them with a hair brush. They would be good for one mile. They'd start off playing, trading punches. Then someone would hit the other too hard, and there'd be a brawl in the back seat while I was driving. Whenever Sherry complains about Emily and Eli and their behavior, I just laugh.

"You can't be their buddy and then expect them to listen to you," I inform her. "Besides, they are *nowhere* near as bad as you and Joey were."

If I tried to label Sherry, I have the most difficulty. Her nature isn't really hillbilly or redneck. However, I can see the redneck in her on occasion. She took a spell partying with Joey as a teen, and she actually had a heart attack at nineteen. Her brush with death was a close one because she was on a heart transplant list for six months. However, her heart somehow repaired itself. Prayer sometimes does work—at least in this incident. She never had another heart scare even though she is carefully monitored by specialist yearly. Because she was undiagnosed as an elliptic until her heart attack, we were unaware of meds she should be taking and the bad reaction

her body would have if she took illicit drugs. Fortunately, Sherry never wanted a repeat of that horrific experience, and she has mostly stayed on the straight and narrow.

Unfortunately, she is a bit home bound like most hillbillies and has no desire to do new things. I got her to visit me in Chicago, but I couldn't convince her to stay for a long time. We went on a trip together to Orlando a few years back, but I know I couldn't convince her to move to Florida if I move there for school. I encouraged her to go to school, and she finished two semesters. However, it was a struggle. Her epilepsy medicines slowed down her mental functions, so it was hard for her to recall information for time tests. Someday, I hope she decides to try it again.

When I started this memoir, she was living in Norman by herself, trying to manage the pain for her hip as best she can. However, she finally reached a level of pain that medicine couldn't help her with and got the hip replacement my dad told her would be the worst decision of her life. I am happy (as always) to say that he was wrong. Her pain now is much less, and they gave her a plastic, flexible hip that should last her two decades or longer. This has allowed her to finally start a family, and she is expecting her first child this summer. Happily, she has chosen a father that will do his best to care for the son they are having. Of course, she is naming him Samuel Joe, proving that there is some hillbilly blood in there after all since hillbillies love using middle names as part of the first name.

I know Sherry's little boy will have a fun childhood with Sherry as his mother.

Chapter 11: Joey

My youngest brother Joey, Joseph Edward Click, Jr., was the baby of the family and spoiled rotten by my mother and me. He was a surprise baby. In fact, my mom swears she was on two forms of birth control when he was conceived. Telling that story, though, incorrectly led Joey to think he was unwanted—he confessed that once as an adult—when the opposite was true. Although my parents thought they were too old to have another kid in their thirties, Joey was the joy of both their hearts, especially my mother's.

Joey was born with a head of curly dark hair and blue eyes. Timmy had extremely curly hair, so this was not surprising. (Timmy used to insist my mom had an affair with a black man because his hair would grow up like an afro). After Joey's first birthday, though, the curls were gone, and his hair turned straight platinum blonde. Joey and I are the only two in the family without any curls in our hair. Because Joey was so adorable, my mom and I babied him a bit too much. The downside of spoiling is it can make a child a lazy adult. I have seen evidence of this since Joey has never held a job more than six months in his life. However, the upside is that Joey treats women better than most of the men in my family. Actually, he is the best of my three brothers in many areas, especially when it comes to respecting women.

Like Dad, he was a tinkerer, forever taking toys apart and putting them back together. As an adult, he has shown tremendous aptitude with electrical things, having taken some classes. In fact, he is a good person to call if things are broken and need fixed. All my brothers are good with their hands—a quality my sisters and I did *not* inherit.

As children, he and Sherry were inseparable. Only two years apart, they were always playing and fighting together. When he was a toddler, Joey was small for his age, and Sherry was big—twice the size of him. I remember once Sherry getting very angry with him (she was

hot headed) and shoving him so hard that he went airborne—his body actually went in the air. After he hit the ground with a loud thump, he got up and attacked her, hitting her with his little fists. Quickly, I moved to separate the two fighting children.

"Sherry, you can't do that! You'll hurt Joey. His feet went off the ground. You could've broke his neck," I told her and swatted her bottom a few times.

When she cried, Joey looked up at me like I was the enemy. "Don't hit my sissy!" he yelled and kicked me in the leg. It was hard to keep a straight face since he was just so adorable. His protective nature was evident at age two.

It wasn't so adorable, though, when the two would hide from me. From age eight until I got my first job, I spent most of my time babysitting. Sherry and Joey took great joy in hiding from me during these times. This scared me to death since we had a pond on the property, and my mother was forever going on about the possible threat of drowning. I'd frequently find Sherry and Joey hiding behind a bush or tree. From ages two through five, they were so cute, however, that I found it hard to stay mad.

"There you are! Didn't you hear me yellin' for ya?" I demanded, the fifth or sixth time they played hide and seek with me without telling me I was playing.

Sherry would look up at me with her wild curls and big hazel eyes and giggle.

"You found us!" she declared excitedly.

"We hide!" Joey announced proudly.

"Stop doing this!" I told them. Of course, they never listened. I knew if they drowned, Dad would kill me—such is the self-centeredness of a teenager.

As he grew older, Joey was always running off and disappearing—he didn't need Sherry to encourage it anymore. I lost him at the mall, Wal-Mart, and the movies more than once, yet I

still kept taking him places. He was our baby, and I could rarely say no to him. It wasn't just because of how cute he was, but it was also because he had a sweet nature to match his looks.

When he was seven, his best friend at church, Jordan, lost his mother due to brain cancer. One day after playing with Jordan, Joey came home and threw himself into Mother's arms.

"Momma, Jordan is still sad about his mommy going to heaven," he told her.

"I know, baby," Mom said, hugging him.

He looked up at her and vowed, "When I get big, I'm not going to get married. I'm just going to take care of you!"

Was it any wonder that we adored him? He was so sweet. In him, my mother finally had the child that soaked up all her adoration and adored her back with equal measure.

Like our parents, he always found things to do. One time, when I came in from college to stay the weekend, he was about seven. Dad and Mom had taken Sherry and gone shopping. Timmy and Kelly were outside playing when I got out of bed. I found Joey in the kitchen eating scrambled eggs and fried bologna. Half awake, it took me a moment to realize that no adult was around to cook his breakfast.

"Joey, where did you get that food?" I asked him.

"I can cook!" he declared.

"What? How can you? You can't even reach the top of the stove," I reminded him, astounded.

"I can cook. I pulled up a chair!" he proudly boasted.

"Don't ever do that! You can burn down the house!" I said. I don't know if that was something he did very often. It couldn't have happened too much, though, since our mother got up at five most mornings to make Joey pancakes or whatever he wanted before school started. Of

course, Jason and I had always gotten cold cereal. It didn't upset me really that she doted more on Joey since I did, too. However, I think the blatant favoritism probably bothered some of my other siblings. Unfortunately, Timmy was so exhausting and so mean-natured that to have a baby boy his opposite was a relief to my mother. Joey wasn't any work the way Timmy always had been. Joey did not have the same physical handicaps, so he did have an unfair advantage.

Once, I came home another weekend the same year and noticed Joey holding his arm up against his chest like it hurt him.

"What happened to your arm, Bo-Bo?" I asked. We rarely called him Joey as a kid.

"I got hurt on the swing," he said.

I nodded, assuming he had gotten hurt jumping out of a swing set at school. After dinner, my dad asked, "Did you see the swing the kids have?"

"No," I said, looking outside. "I don't see any swing."

"Come on, Amy! I'll show you!" Kelly said excitedly. Kelly, the middle sister, was twelve, and always the first to try new things.

I followed Kelly, Timmy, Sherry, and Joey through the property, stopping at the ravine that was in the middle. The ravine had about a twenty foot drop. A tall, thin tree stood at the edge of the cliff. Frowning in confusion, I looked around for a swing. Then, I focused on the tree. It had a rope hanging down from it, and a short board tied to it.

"Is that the swing?" I asked in disbelief.

"Yes. Watch," Kelly said. Then she fearlessly grabbed the rope, putting her feet on the board and swung out across the ravine in a circle until she came back around to the cliff.

Watching her terrified me.

"Are you guys crazy?" I asked, my heart pounding in fear at her stunt.

"It's fun, Amy! You should try it," Timmy said with a grin. Timmy was not as naturally daring as Kelly, but he endeavored to keep up with her as much as possible.

"I don't think so," I said. Then I looked at Joey and realized something. "Bo-Bo, is that the swing you hurt your arm on?"

He nodded.

"No, he didn't hurt his arm swinging," Kelly said. She leaned over and pointed to a small ledge in the cliff a few feet down. "See that? Bo-Bo was standing there, and I was going to swing around and catch him. I missed."

"What?" I asked, incredulous. "He fell?"

Kelly shrugged. "He's okay. His arm ain't broke," she said dismissively.

I turned and marched back to the house to confront my parents.

"Mom, did you see that swing they got up? It's insane! Joey could've broken his neck!" I insisted.

"I know," she said, giving Dad a cross look.

"Dad, did you see the swing?" I asked.

"Who do you think put it up?" he replied, grinning and obviously proud of his act.

"You climbed that tree and put up that swing?" I asked in shock both at the swing and the idea of him climbing a tree.

"Yep," he said, proud. "They're having fun on it."

"It's too dangerous, Dad!" I protested.

Dad waved his hand dismissively. "When I was a kid, we used to swing from vines into the Ohio River," he shared, unconcerned. Like always, he and my mother had very different reactions and parenting styles.

I am convinced that my family had extra hard-working guardian angels because no major tragedy ever befell any of them as the result of these kinds of shenanigans. However, there were a few close calls. I know they each had a personal near-death experience as a child due to their wild stunts. This kind of fearlessness in childhood stems from the Hillbilly tradition. Mountain folks are brave, tireless individuals rarely intimidated by physical challenges or limitations. Daniel Boone, after all, fearlessly mastered the first Appalachian crossing, bringing about the settlement of Kentucky. Hillbillies have striven to imitate his daring in one form or another for generations.

In this aspect, though, I cannot really relate. My nature is to be cautious, but I am brave in ways they are not. For example, I moved to Chicago in my mid-twenties without knowing a soul and with only \$400 to my name. At no time was I afraid or concerned about my well-being or safety. To save money, I even voluntarily moved into a homeless shelter for a month to save up money for an apartment. The shelter was two blocks away from a halfway house for paroled felons. Once, a man walked from the train stop with me, telling me he had been paroled for killing his wife. I had a friendly conversation with this murderer and walk away unmolested. Treat others the way you want to be treated is a rule I have found great success with.

Risking life and limb was not something I did very often as a child, yet I do have the same boldness when it comes to people and living my life. Unlike most of my siblings, when I don't like something in my life, I change it—a job, a location, even people.

Joey, though, has rarely *voluntarily* spent time away from his family. When he was in second or third grade, my dad was actually around while he was getting ready for school. Normally, Dad was already gone to work. For a few years, though, Dad was a truck driver, so he

was home for a few weeks at a time. Dad noticed that Joey had a glass jar that he was putting inside his backpack.

"Whatcha got there, Bo-Bo?" he asked, curious.

"It's Show-N-Tell today," he explained. "I caught a baby grass snake." He proudly held up the snake for Dad to see.

Now in small country schools like Noble, bringing a grass snake to school would not be cause for much alarm. However, Dad grabbed the jar and examined the snake.

"You can't take this," he informed Joey.

"Why not?" Joey asked, upset.

"Because this isn't a grass snake, Bo-Bo. It's a baby rattlesnake," he replied.

My eyes widened in alarm when my dad relayed this tale. "He put a rattlesnake in a jar? Is he insane?" I exclaimed.

"He didn't know. It looks kind of like a grass snake 'cause the babies don't have the rattles on them yet," Dad replied.

This was not Joey's last close call with a snake. Copperheads were in abundance on our property. Kelly saved him once from stepping on one as they walked down the long drive to catch the bus. Another time, when Joey was ten, both my brother Jason and I were at Dad's when Joey came in screaming his head off.

"A snake bit me!" he exclaimed in terror.

Since my mother knew that copperheads were in abundance on our twenty-acre property, she began tearing off his clothes looking for the snake bite. Fortunately, she didn't find any broken skin.

Once Joey calmed down, my mother got him to share his tale.

"I was at the barn, and there was this giant copperhead on the fence post," he said. "It jumped out at me and struck my pants leg."

"It's a good thing you were wearing jeans!" my mother said in relief as she hugged him.

"What in the world were you doing going to the barn at ten o'clock at night?" I asked him.

"I was feeding my pet tarantula," he explained.

I shook my head, mystified. Brothers are often mysterious creatures.

Interaction with snakes and other wildlife was another area that I differed from my siblings. We had goats growing up, and outside of being made to milk them, I spent no time playing with them since they always tried to eat my hair. Going outside was something I only did when forced to, whereas my siblings loved being outside and rarely came inside except for mealtime. Not once did I ever encounter a snake growing up because I never went outside unless Jason convinced me to do something with him. Both Joey and Timmy lived for their outdoor time.

I can remember more than once my mother telling me, "Amy, put the book down and go outside and play." I rarely listened unless forced to. Then I would take a solitary walk. My mother didn't understand that I was never taught how to *play*.

I wish I could say that my baby brother stayed the sweet boy he was as a child. However, at age twelve, he began experimenting with marijuana. This happened after my parents split up, so it is logical to assume that he did this as a way of coping with the turmoil my parents ugly divorced caused in his life. He was thirteen when my mother moved him and Sherry to Eastern Kentucky, where drugs were easily accessible. His life of crime and drug abuse began at age fifteen when he stole his first car. My mother had him in juvie and Job Core, trying to get him

some rehab. Marijuana, though, is rarely the only drug a teenager tries—it's what they start with. In Joey's case, he went from marijuana to snorting opiates. By the time he became an adult and moved back home to Oklahoma, he was on crystal meth, marking his soul and ruining his life.

At twenty-two, he became a father with a girl he was crazy about. Kasandra, though, was too broken to be healed by Joey's love. By the time their daughter, Emily, was two years old, my Dad had taken over her care. This occurred because the police in Purcell had called him too many times to come and get Emily after signs of neglect. Not once did they ever call DHS, but my dad became disgusted with a few scenes he witnessed that I wasn't there for. He convinced Joey it would be best if he became her primary caregiver, and Joey agreed. Dad went to court, and the judge concurred. Kasi tried to protest it, but she wasn't sober and never worked. They were allowed to visit whenever they wanted.

By the time she was four and a half, I became co-guardian due to my dad's failing eyesight. Mostly, I got tired of seeing Emily in stained up clothes. Dad couldn't see the stains, which was cause for some alarm. Plus, all school girls need a female around. Joey, unlike Timmy, has never been able to escape the prison system. He isn't as stubborn as Timmy and usually lets the lawyer talk him into deals. That is how he agreed in 2016 to a twelve-year sentence for stealing a car and resisting arrest. With good behavior, he could be out in 2019.

Unfortunately, the drug addicted version of Joey is always trying to work a con or play the system or people. I am not confident that his time in prison will change him for the better even though I am hopeful that he realizes how destructive crystal meth is to the body—he's been reading books about it in prison. When Joey is on drugs, he is truly insidious—without compare. He will steal from anyone even his mother, baring little resemblance to the baby brother I adore. He will also pit sibling against sibling in masterful ways of manipulation. Once he became

angry at Kelly for not taking him down to the store when he wanted, and he put dirt in her gas tank, destroying the car.

To me, he is the most like Jason, our oldest brother, which is ironic when they were not raised together due to the age gap between them. Both are very charismatic and make friends easily. Jason, however, was highly manipulative—sober.

Once a principal in Joey's school told me that Joey, an eighth grader, had remarkable leadership skills.

"If he is in a group of boys, he could be the youngest one there, but he is always the leader," she told me. "I wish he used his power for good instead of getting into trouble all the time."

So did I. Unfortunately, eighth grade was the last grade he completed. When he stole a car the summer before his freshman year, he was sent to juvie. When he returned home and seemed interested in the same bad things, my mom decided to send him to Job Corp, hoping he would obtain a GED and a skill set. Instead, he got kicked out halfway through possessing cigarettes *she* supplied him on a visit. The only other time he has focused on his GED outside of that has been while he is incarcerated.

Sober, Joey is the only sibling that will ever ask me about my day, my job, or my life. His compassionate and protective nature hasn't been stomped out. All of his adult life, he has shown his protectiveness of our mother and his sisters—even Dad. In so many different ways, I have seen evidence of his love for all of us. His daughter, Emily, is adored by him and is his reason for living. Sober or not, she is rarely far from his thoughts even if he is engaging in drug activities.

In the past eighteen months, I have taken her to visit her daddy in four different places. As he moves up levels for good behavior, he gets to better prisons. Now he is in a half-way house in Ponca City, which is over two hours away. The good thing is, though, I no longer have to worry about his safety. At Joseph Harper Correctional Facility for eight months, his life was in constant danger. Inmates were killed while he was there. His jaw was broken, and his cheek bones shattered. Then he was diagnosed with testicular cancer during his third month there. Luckily, they caught it early. I can't help but wonder if his time in prison saved his life. Living on the streets, working his con, he might not have realized he had cancer until it was too late.

Is Joey a hillbilly or a redneck? He is much easier to label. I would call him redneck almost entirely. He has been reading my book—the only sibling that would take the time to read it—and agrees that he is more redneck than hillbilly even though he spent several teenage years in the mountains. Recently, he told me that more than one inmate teased him about being a redneck. When he told him that his sister was writing a book about that, they wouldn't believe him.

"I have a copy of her early draft in my room!" he shared. I know at least one inmate read it.

His love for the women in his family has never waned—not even prison can destroy the goodness at his core. Hopefully, one day he conquers his demons and becomes the father that Emily needs. It is my greatest wish.

Chapter 12: My Aunts

My dad gifted me with three aunts since he has three siblings while my mother only had two siblings. Although my grandpa was married before he married my maternal grandmother, my mom never had any contact with her five half-siblings, which always made me sad. I have several first cousins, then, that I have never known. Mother met only one of her half-siblings when Grandpa died. The aunts I did have, however, were a blessing to me at various points in my life. My dad's only sister Beba, who was born Clair Beba, is the only one who I never formed a relationship with due to our infrequent contact with her. She lives in Wyoming, and I never saw her or her three daughters but a few times growing up.

When I was in sixth grade, Jason and I spent a summer in Rock Springs, Wyoming with Uncle Sill and Aunt Lynn. My Aunt Lynn was my mother's best friend growing up. She had like a dozen siblings and was a very poor, which created a hard life for her as a child and teenager. She and Uncle Sill were ten years apart in age. I don't know much about their courtship except that both Mom and Lynn married around eighteen. Aunt Lynn told me that Uncle Sill was her one and only and had been very patient with her. They are still married to this day, and she is still a devoted and faithful wife to him as he struggles with dementia and other health challenges.

Lynn was my favorite aunt for many years. She treated me the way I had always wished my mother had treated me. I learned to drive because of her, and I have very good memories of my time with her and my cousins. She has a daughter my age, Tarena, and a son, Jimmy, two years younger than us. Her youngest daughter, Jessica, is my sister Kelly's age.

Growing up, my cousin Tarena and I fought like cats and dogs. The only relative I have that I can say that about. We were close at times, but we were very different people. From ages

eleven until we were about sixteen, we occasionally got into hair-pulling, face-slapping fights. However, we were close even though we fought a lot. Tarena was a wild teen and pregnant by seventeen and married by age twenty. Once her marriage fell apart seven or eight years later, she met a guy that turned her on to drugs and has battled her addiction to drugs ever since.

My favorite cousin as a child was my Uncle Pokey's son Tommy, who I have already mentioned. He was three weeks older than me, and my hero most of my young life. His mother was my Aunt Cordy. Cordy probably fit the stereotypical hillbilly female more than any of my aunts. As I mentioned early in this memoir, she was very comfortable with a gun. I remember her shooting a snake, but I don't think she ever went hunting with the guys. However, since she liked bars and fun times, she was more apt to hang with the guys than my mother. I neither adored her or hated her. I found her more pleasant than Uncle Pokey, but she was a bit on the bawdy side. We sometimes conflicted when it came to her only daughter Trenette, who we all called Sissy. Sissy often picked on and hit my sister Kelly. Although Sissy was only two years younger than I, she was four years older than Kelly. When I would be playing with Tommy, though, Sissy would play with Kelly when she was four or five.

Once, Kelly came to me crying. "Sissy hit me!" she cried.

Of course, Kelly was my sister, and I wouldn't let anyone pick on her. I marched up to Sissy and slapped her. "Don't hit Kelly! You are four years older than her!" I informed her. Now, I wasn't one to ever hit anyone. For instance, I had a life time of ignoring Timmy. Jason and I never fought. In fact, I only ever fought with Tarena. So on the rare occasion that I laid a hand on Sissy, it was because she had hurt Kelly. Naturally, Sissy ran crying to her mother.

"Amy, how dare you hit, Sissy! I'm telling your dad on you!" she threatened.

I, though, was unconcerned. "I don't care," I replied. "She hit Kelly. She better stop hitting my sister."

"You are older than Sissy, and you don't need to be hitting her," she said, angry.

"Well, I am only *two* years older than Sissy, and she is *four* years older than Kelly," I informed her. "She hits my sister again, I will hit her."

When Cordy went tattling to my dad, he said, "Don't hit Sissy."

I said, "I won't unless she hits Kelly." When Dad didn't yell at me or punish me, Cordy was really annoyed. Yes, I was one of those annoying kids that always did what they were told and never got into trouble.

Once Aunt Cordy and Uncle Poke moved to Wyoming, I never spoke to Cordy again except a few times on Facebook. I saw Uncle Pokey once, but Cordy had divorced him by then. Unfortunately, Cordy passed away in 2016 of cancer.

My mom's two sisters were so vastly different from one another. My mother looks more like her sister Thelma, which isn't too surprising since they share both a mother and a father. Both are short while Aunt Linda was tall around five feet seven or eight inches tall. My mother is about an inch over five foot, and Aunt Thelma is about one inch taller than she. How to describe Aunt Thelma? Well, she is the most colorful family member that I have. She has never married, but she had a son out of wedlock in 1975 and never named his father. She was—in her own words—fairly free with her love. Her only son Richard didn't meet his biological father until he was an adult with kids of his own. Thelma did, however, find a nice, stable boyfriend that became Richard's pseudo-father most of his childhood, paying for his private Catholic school education.

Thelma is probably the smartest relative I have IQ-wise. She is also well educated and a voracious reader. When you talk to her, you have to laugh because she is a funny conversationalist. She is great at storytelling because her stories are always colored with insightful questionings and anecdotal musings. Unfortunately, her wit in person never comes across on the page. As an aunt, she is amazing and always writes everyone. All my life, we have corresponded. Her letters, though, are like a diary of what she's doing—mind numbingly boring, which I always found surprising because she is such a funny person. She is bipolar and prone to extremes. Aunt Linda told me once that she was nine months pregnant with her first born, Michele, when Thelma attacked her. They got into a fist fight. Thelma was like that. I can remember her attacking Uncle Jack once when he was drunk and poured beer on Richard as a joke. Thelma didn't think it was funny and fists were flying.

Once I asked her, "Thelma, do you hear voices?"

"Doesn't everyone?" she asked, not joking.

"No, everyone doesn't," I told her. "I don't."

She wasn't teasing me, but I never ventured to inquire further.

I remember visiting Thelma, who lived in Lexington, Kentucky, most of her adult life, when I was a teenager. She took me swimming at the public pool, a rare treat for me. Although I was excited to go swimming, I was mortified to discover that Aunt Thelma didn't shave any of her body hair. This means my well-endowed aunt wore a bathing suit with underarm hair like a man's, including hairy legs like a man. It was a horrific, shocking sight to my fourteen-year-old eyes.

"Aunt Thelma, how come you didn't shave? You're not supposed to go swimming in public without shaving," I informed her when we got to the pool, and I realized her unshorn state.

"I don't need to shave to please any man," she told me. Although I admired her ability to be indifferent to the judgment of others, I was really grossed out. It didn't help matters that she enthusiastically got on the diving board, holding her arms and flashing her hairy pits for all to see. When she hit the water and her large breasts fell out of her suit, I wanted to die of embarrassment. Of course, it didn't faze her. She just laughed and shoved them back in.

Thelma is an avid Star Trek fan and cat lover. In fact, police have stopped her when private citizens reported a crazy woman (their words) walking her cats at five in the morning. Because she talked to her cats like they were people, observers thought she was talking to people who weren't there. Mother watched her talk to her long-time cat Dumanis once and became convinced that the cat understood her. When Dumanis was diagnosed with cancer, I was really upset for her because she loved this cat so much.

"Oh, he's fine," she told me a few weeks later when I inquired after his health. "I just anointed him with oil and prayed over him."

The cat did live six or seven more years.

Thelma is probably the first real feminist I ever met. She's always been a great aunt, supportive and encouraging.

However, it is my Aunt Linda that I adored the most. In many ways, she is like Aunt Inez, generous, kind, hospitable. In fact, her daughter Melissa had more than one friend growing up who thought of Aunt Linda as their mother. She mothered and embraced *everyone*. I don't think she ever met a stranger. This is where I can see a real distinction between redneck women

and hillbilly women. Aunt Inez was warm and welcoming, but she was a woman of the mountains, never seeking out people to care for. Aunt Linda, on the other hand, would find people who needed her and give of everything she had. Her life was one of financial poverty, yet she was always generous never turning away anyone in need.

In her, you could see our Cherokee blood (Grandma Reedy was Cherokee Indian). Her hair was always long, black, and straight. As she aged, it was streaked with grey. Only the last year or two of her life did she ever wear it short. Her favorite thing was to have someone play with her hair, a job I loved having whenever we visited her.

When she was pregnant with her last daughter, Shantelle, my brother Timmy was three. "Timbo, come see my puppy," Aunt Linda told him, putting his hand on her stomach. Timmy frowned, confused. He didn't see any puppy. "Where, Aunt Linda?" he asked. "In here," she said, pointing to her belly. For some reason, she always claimed she was having a puppy. Every time, we'd go visit, Timmy would excitedly run up to her.

"Where's your puppy, Aunt Linda?" he asked.

"Still inside," she'd say, rubbing her belly.

I remember thinking she was silly but never thought much about the game she played with Timmy. Then she gave birth to Shantelle. Timmy was so disappointed when he came to see her for the first time.

"Where's your puppy, Aunt Linda?" he asked.

"Here she is!" Aunt Linda announced, holding up the baby for her to see.

Timmy frowned. "That's no puppy! That's just a dumb baby! We have one of those already!" Kelly was eight months old when Shantelle was born, so he was not impressed with

another baby. I will never forget how excited he was to see her puppies, and how disappointed he was when her puppies never materialized.

Aunt Linda wasn't afraid to confront Uncle Jack when he was drunk. I remember as a child seeing her raising her fists to him. "Why you hitting Jack?" I asked her once.

"My first husband, Bobby, used to beat me. Michele's bio-dad. I always swore no man would ever hit me again or if they did, I'd get plenty of licks in myself!" she informed me. I don't know if Jack only tried once or twice to hit her when he was drunk. I just know that Aunt Linda had determined to never be a victim again, and I loved and admired her for it. This female strength she had was what I wanted in myself—it was the strength I never witnessed in my own mother.

Unlike Thelma, Linda was a dog person and had no use for cats. She had this dog named Uggie for many years. Uggie used to catch flies with his tongue; it was a strange sight. Whenever Linda traveled to Kentucky for visits, she'd hate to be away from her dogs—she always had two at any given time. She'd actually call and talk to them on the phone, and they'd bark happily to her. It was as odd as Aunt Thelma's cat conversation.

Growing up, my mother liked cats and dogs equally. We had more cats than dogs growing up. Now, though, she's a dog person. Growing up, our farm animals adored her. The last year she was married to my dad, they had this calf that would follow her around like a puppy. When it'd moo, it sounded like it was saying, "Moomma!" She even tamed this wild goose that followed my siblings home from the bus. It was an evil bird, nearly five foot tall. It was squawk and throw up its wings aggressively. I'm not ashamed to say that I would turn and run from it, but not mother. To her, the bird was calm and never aggressive. It was the oddest thing. All three of them remind me of Uncle Mark with their affinity with animals.

I think my own good experiences with aunts is why I am perfectly happy being an aunt with no desire to be a mother. Aunts can be role models, encouragers, and much needed support. When I was a college student working on my undergraduate degree at Oklahoma State, it was Aunt Linda and not my mother that would always call and ask me about my day and my classes. Losing her was hard on all of us, especially her girls and my mother. To my mother, she was more than a sister—she was her best friend. Aunt Linda died several years ago from a surprise blood clot. She didn't even make it to her 60's. However, after Uncle Jack passed away at fifty-four, she didn't seem to enjoy life like she used to. It's funny how a person seems more a grandmother than a wife, but then when her husband was gone, she didn't really know how to exist without that part of her. I think she was as surprised as the rest of us that Uncle Jack was so vital to her happiness. I hope the two have been reunited in death because an eternity away from Jack would be a real hell for Aunt Linda. May she rest in peace.

Chapter 13: Aunt Inez

My Aunt Inez and Uncle Mark took in my mother and Aunt Thelma when Aunt Inez's youngest sister died, their mother. Aunt Inez has been dead just a few years, and the sadness I feel when I think about her not being on this earth anymore is significant. As a child, visits to see her and Uncle Mark were rare. When my dad was making good money and there were fewer kids, we went yearly. From ages nine to nineteen, though, we only went once or twice to see them. My mother went in for Aunt Ethel's funeral alone, and she and Dad drove in without us when Uncle Namon, Pappy's brother and Aunt Ethel's husband passed. Fortunately, I saw her almost yearly the last decade of her life.

If you were to describe your ideal grandmother or what qualities would encompass the ideal grandmother, you would be describing my Aunt Inez. According to Aunt Thelma, her parents had named her Inis, but it was spelled wrong on her birth certificate. Her parents, Mommy and Poppy Reedy were the only ones to call her that. One of thirteen kids, she was raised during the depression and knew hardship, yet no loss her amount of personal pain ever broke her completely. She was born a twin—one of two sets her mother birthed. Her twin brother Manis died of diarrhea when she was a baby. Pepto Bismol had just come onto the market. The story I was told was that Poppy Reedy walked thirteen miles to the closest store to get some for his twins, but when he made it home, Inez's twin had passed. Strangely enough, Pepto Bismol saved her life.

As the oldest daughter of a large family, Aunt Inez was taught many of the traditional skills women of her generation were apt to master. I cannot think of anything she could not do and do well. There was never a better cook in our family. Mealtime at her house was a time for rejoicing. My dad used to say that no one could set a table like Inez Owens. Her desserts in

particular brought joy to the eaters. Uncle Mark had property that he grew sugar cane on, so he would make homemade molasses that she'd add to her dinners. If you have never tasted molasses, you are missing out on a special treat. I can remember times as a child that we had no dessert but toast and molasses, and we were happy to have it.

Although Uncle Mark worked a larger farmland many miles from their home, they always kept a small garden in the back yard—about half an acre or so in my estimate. This meant there was always an abundance of fresh vegetables at the dinner table. Naturally, vegetables were canned since the art of canning was something most people in the mountains seemed to know how to do. My mother did it, and I know most of my second and third cousins have mentioned it. Jelly and jam making was also done by many females related to me. Marky's wife Caroline even explained to me once the difference between jelly and jam, but I can never remember what it is. Hillbillies know a plethora of things that once was necessary to learn for survival. Many of those skills were passed on to younger generations. However, I will admit to never caring to know about how to do any of that. Nor did I ever want to do any sewing related skill. For me, those kinds of activities are tedious. I had much rather read a book. However, I do not think it's too much of an exaggeration to say that over 65% of the women related to me in Eastern Kentucky can do many of the things Aunt Inez could do.

I do not believe many redneck women would ever be as skilled. They might know fishing, hunting, and camping, but they don't always have the wide-range of skills found in the hillbilly women. In this, hillbilly women stand apart, stronger and more enduring. Their talents and skills are generational, surviving all the challenges life throws at them.

Aunt Inez's house was always immaculate and full of little knick-knacks that she had collected over the years. She like, Aunt Linda, loved her things. Her talents were ample. Not

only did she grow several beautiful flowers in her flower bed, she was quite talented with a needle. Crocheting and quilting are two talents of hers my mother inherited to a degree. There were many afghans and quilts given to us over the years. Before she died, she made every niece of hers a quilt. This was accomplished after the age of eighty. I know all three of Aunt Linda's girls got one and so did my sisters and I. I am not sure if she made Richard one or not. Of course, she made her girls—Mom, Thelma, and Linda—one, too, during her final decade. Since she had lots of other nieces, I am sure there were others she made over the years. Her skill never waned and her generosity never dulled.

Her talents didn't end with that, however. She also was quite clever with beads and made many Christmas ornaments. We had several growing up, but they weren't kept after the divorce. I'm not sure what happened to them. When she passed, I would've like to have gotten something she had made or even her book collection. Instead, I was given two strange Knick-knacks I never saw in her house, but she owned—they had to have been in a closet somewhere. Although I have no tangible evidence of her talents outside of the quilt she made me, I won't forget various things I saw over the years growing up. She was a woman of many talents.

I remember the first time as a teenager I studied the book of Proverbs and read the virtuous woman Solomon described. When I read it, I knew that it described Aunt Inez so perfectly:

Who can find a virtuous and capable wife? She is more precious than rubies. Her husband can trust her, and she will greatly enrich his life. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life. She finds wool and flax and busily spins it. She is like a merchant's ship, bringing her food from afar. She gets up before dawn to prepare breakfast for her household and plan the day's work for her servant girls. She goes to inspect a field and buys it; with her earnings she plants a vineyard. She is energetic and strong, a hard worker. She makes sure her dealings are profitable; her lamp burns late into the night. Her hands are busy spinning thread, her fingers twisting fiber. She extends a helping hand to the poor and opens her arms to the needy. She has no fear of winter for her household, for everyone has warm clothes. She makes her own

bedspreads. She dresses in fine linen and purple gowns. Her husband is well known at the city gates, where he sits with the other civic leaders. She makes belted linen garments and sashes to sell to the merchants. She is clothed with strength and dignity, and she laughs without fear of the future. When she speaks, her words are wise, and she gives instructions with kindness. She carefully watches everything in her household and suffers nothing from laziness. Her children stand and bless her. Her husband praises her: "There are many virtuous and capable women in the world, but you surpass them all!" (Proverbs 31: 10-30 *NLT*)

To anyone that knew and loved her, they would agree that no woman in our family fits this passage more than Aunt Inez.

The only thing I think I inherited from her is my love of books and reading. My dad was a book lover—an avid reader growing up he says. My mother, though, could never sit still long enough to read a book. Aunt Inez, like me, loved all popular fiction: Nora Roberts, Danielle Steele, Sheryl Woods and many like them. She once told me, "The saddest thing about dying to me is thinking of all the books I won't get to read."

When she said that to me once, I thought, "She gets it! She knows how I feel!" Having a mother who never read a book in front of me often made me feel like I wasn't the right type of woman. However, Aunt Inez validated me and made me feel like I belonged in the family after all. What's so funny about Aunt Inez's love of reading for pleasure is how opposite Uncle Mark was. A true lover of the written word, Uncle Mark found words of books to be written treasures gifted to benefit the mind and feed the soul. The thought of reading for pleasure or to escape was blasphemous to him.

"You read to learn and edify the mind," he admonished me. "You enjoy it because you love learning."

I laughed. Although I loved many of the classics like he did, I was more like Aunt Inez when it came to books. "The only reason I love to read is for pleasure and to escape. Learning something is just an added bonus!" I informed him with a grin. Of course, she was college

educated and had read many classics. She may have loved them, but she never discussed those kinds of books with me.

Uncle Mark and Aunt Inez were so different—even their approach to books were opposites. He was such a tease, and she was so kind and full of grace. Both, though, had a generosity of spirit that was rare in today's world. Her door was never locked, and everyone was welcomed there. Rarely did she not have a niece or nephew or grandchild or friend of a relative stopping by, staying over, or joining her table at meal time. The more the merrier was something Uncle Mark and Aunt Inez epitomized in their hospitality. I had a pastor once tell me that there was such a thing as a gift of hospitality—I could see that in my beloved Aunt, the only real grandmother I knew.

If there was one quality of hers that I hope I could cultivate in myself, it is that. To be generous in words and deeds is a legacy worth passing on. It's one the two of them passed on to their son, Marky and grandson Walter. One day, I would like it to be said about me.

I think the Owens family and the Click family are both solid examples of the hillbilly people. Many hillbillies are uneducated, harsh, and cruel. Whether it's life that made them so or a legacy of drug and alcohol abuse, those qualities exist in many women but more men. Many, though, are ornery, funny, generous, and extremely industrious. In contrast, the rednecks are more fun-lovin' but still possess the kindness Southern men and women are known for.

Both groups are a legacy I can see embracing to various degrees.

Chapter 14: The Uncles

Besides my Great-Uncle Mark, I had three uncles in my life growing up: Uncle Pokey, Sill, and Jack. My Aunt Beba had several husbands, and I met one of them once or twice. However, I couldn't tell you his name now. I was a teenager before I met her favorite husband—she married him twice—so he had no impact on my life. My mom's sister, Thelma, never married, so she never gave me an uncle. Only Aunt Linda married and gave me Uncle Jack, my favorite even though he was once again an uncle by marriage. Dad's two brothers, Sill and Pokey, were in my life at different points.

Pokey, dad's youngest and closest sibling, was born Trent Estell Click, Jr. He took after his mother in height. Both he and Beba were short—shorter than me anyway. All the other Clicks, including all my dad's uncles, were over six foot. Jason and Pokey were the only two Click males in the entire family to be shorter than five feet and eleven inches. Joey grew to that height, and Timmy to an even six feet. Jason is about five feet six or seven inches.

I asked my dad why Pokey was called Pokey, and he told me that there was some kid's program when they were a kid with Pokey the Clown. Pokey either liked it so much that they called him that, or he asked to be called Pokey. My dad's youngest brother was his best friend, but to me, he wasn't someone that invited questions, so I never asked him. He's been dead over twenty years, so I can't really ask him now.

Tommy, Pokey's middle son, was three weeks older than me, and my absolute favorite person until he moved away when I was twelve. He was the kind of boy that other boys liked since he was naturally athletic and very high energy. However, he adored his mom and sister, and he would willingly play with dolls with me. When he joined me in first grade, I remember playing chase on the playground. All the boys would chase the girls except for Tommy—he was

always on my side. My great protector, my defender, my best friend. When they moved back to Wyoming about six years later, it broke my heart. Sadly, we were never close again. Instead, Jason's charisma won him over, and they're close to this day. In fact, a few years ago when Jason had surgery on his shoulder, Tommy flew into the state to take care of him. He grew up to be the kind of man I always saw as a boy—kind, generous, and loyal—a natural caretaker. In fact, he was a licensed caregiver for several years in his early twenties. His goal of being a licensed nurse never came to fruition because he said the schooling was too much for him.

Tommy wasn't anything like his dad or brother. I asked my dad once if Tommy was my brother and not my cousin because he and I looked more alike than any of my other brothers. He looked more like me than his siblings. We both have sandy blonde hair, a slightly big nose, a wide smile, and a face that is prone to freckle. I am the tallest female in my entire family at five feet and ten inches while he is the tallest man at six feet and four inches.

"Dad, you can tell me. Did you and Cordy ever get drunk and hook up?" I asked him once a few years ago.

"What?" he asked me, surprised.

"Mom and I used to speculate that Tommy was my brother and not my cousin because we were more alike. Nicky is sadistic and cruel like his Dad, and Tommy wasn't. We thought maybe something happened once between you and Cordy. Mom said she used to flirt with you when she was drinking," I confessed.

"No, Amy, Tommy is *not* your brother. I never slept with Cordy," he told me. Dad and I can talk about anything these days.

I am not sure if I was relieved or disappointed. Uncle Pokey was not someone I admired or wanted to be around. In fact, he was someone I feared. His cruelty and twisted thinking was

mystifying. Sadly, he was known to take his fists to both his boys even as he spoiled and pampered Trenette. However, it was his mind that I found the most unsettling.

Once when I was eleven or twelve, I went into my bedroom to read and escape all the madness. By this point, my family was at six children, and Pokey and them were living with us once again. Although we lived in a much bigger house in Noble, it still was a loud, chaotic household with nine children running around. I had a new kitten that had wandered into the room. Nicky came along and grinned at me as he picked up the cat.

“Put my kitty down, Nicky,” I said, not trusting the look in his eyes. He was the one who showed me how crazy a cat gets if you stick Scotch tape on their tail. Hurting animals was something he took sadistic pleasure in—even more so than Jason.

“I can hold the cat if I want,” he said, petting it. Then he held the cat up to the ceiling fan, causing me to jump up.

“Stop it! You’ll kill my cat!” I yelled, slapping at him.

He laughed and held the cat away from me. Jason walked by.

“Jason, tell Nicky to give me back my kitty. He’s going to hurt him!” I told my brother.

“Nicky, give her back her cat,” Jason ordered. Jason was the alpha in the nine of us. His word was law, so Nicky gave me my cat.

Clutching my cat protectively, I immediately went to tell on Nicky. “Pokey, Nicky turned on my ceiling fan and tried to stick my cat in it!” I tattled.

“Did you see him turn on the fan?” Pokey asked me.

His question confused me. What did that have to do with anything? “I saw him put my cat up into the fan!” I insisted.

“If you didn’t see him turn on the fan, why should I believe anything you say?” he asked.

“The fan wasn’t on until he came into the room. Turning on the fan wasn’t what was wrong. Putting the cat into the fan was!” I argued. But it didn’t matter—Pokey was done listening to me. Nicky didn’t get into trouble. He never did for real things. If he stole money from you, Pokey dismissed it because we couldn’t *prove* it. But if Nicky woke him up from a nap, he’d get a beating. Pokey was a disturbing adult, who I least admired.

However, he was my dad's best friend. They were an odd pair with my dad towering over him. Yet Dad told me more than once that Pokey had learned some scary fighting skills in the Marines and was a holy terror in a bar fight. They were two years apart in age. Dad employed Pokey in his shop for a few years. Pokey was a gifted mechanic—the best Dad ever knew. As an alcoholic, though, Pokey couldn't hold down a steady job, so Dad kept him employed. All that came crashing down when Dad and Pokey got into an ugly fight on Joey's first birthday. It almost became physical when Pokey put his hands on Dad, shoving him. Dad restrained himself, though, and didn’t hit him back. Things were said, though, that couldn’t be taken back. Things were never the same after that.

After I was an adult, my dad and his brother reconciled. Unfortunately, Pokey's excessive drinking led to his death in his early forties. His children found him dead in his home. Cordy and he had divorced a few years prior to that. He had been dead a few days before he was discovered. I don't think my dad has ever stopped missing his brother.

His older brother, Sill, born Sylvester, is tall like my dad, but an inch shorter. However, Sill was the odd duck in his family. He is the only one who saw real combat experience in Vietnam, and the only one to never turn to alcohol. Like my dad, Sill is stubborn and intelligent. His field of expertise was with electronics like television and VCR's. Sill is a mild-mannered man, who I have never witnessed angry. Nor can I recall a time that he lost his temper. Of

course, I heard about times from second hand sources, but he was always self-controlled and fun loving in my presence.

He was devotedly Baptist and would do extensive studies, trying to convince me that Pentecostals and speaking in tongues was not scriptural. He was like most Southern Baptist even though he attended the Free Will. A strong chauvinistic attitude colored his ideology. When his oldest daughter Tarena was married at a small Pentecostal church, he refused to attend because the pastor was a woman. When this same daughter was pregnant at seventeen, the last semester of her high school, he threw her out of the house.

However, he wasn't one to stay upset for long. Eventually, he'd feel bad and relent. Over the years, it has been him more than his wife who has helped Tarena as she struggles with drug-addiction time and time again. He is a good man, who now fights various health problems. I can't say that I was ever attached to him, but he has always had my respect and love.

The only uncle that I really loved a lot growing up (besides my great uncle) was my uncle by marriage, Uncle Jack. Jack Turner was one of many siblings from Garret, Kentucky. He had close to a dozen siblings. Most were alcoholics. One sibling trapped and set another one on fire, killing him. The Turner men were not often good men. I knew his brother Bob and Larry, who lived in Oklahoma. The really crazy brothers stayed in the mountains of Kentucky. He was my Aunt Linda's second husband and the father to three of her four children. Aunt Linda's oldest daughter Michele considered Jack her father—he never treated her like a stepdaughter.

Uncle Jack was even more mild-mannered than Uncle Sill. He was a small man, shorter than myself and Aunt Linda. Like Uncle Pokey, he was a gifted mechanic, who was also a drunk. Where Pokey started with the hard liquor like whiskey by lunch time, Jack was strictly a beer drinker. His beer drinking killed him at age fifty-four. My Aunt Linda would leave him

every other year or two over his drinking, and he'd sober up and win her back. Without Aunt Linda, he was always a broken and loss individual. He loved her and would try earnestly to stay sober for her. Yet the demon liquor would always pull him back in. The cycle continued until his death.

I never heard him call my aunt by her name. It was always, "Old woman." That may sound rude, but she always called him, "Old man." Of course, Jack wasn't one to call anyone by their name. He called me "Memoe" for some odd reason. Occasionally, he would call me Amy Jo—the only relative that ever used my middle name. That, in a way, was a form of a nickname. My brother Timmy he called Booger Man. My dad was always called Big Joe. He had a nephew by his brother Bob, whose son was Little Joe. When my baby brother Joey was born, Joey was what he was called since we already had a Little Joe in the family. Sherry May, he called Flossy May. He loved giving nicknames to so many of us; it made us feel special.

My dad always loves to tell the story of the time he took Jack and Linda out to a really nice steakhouse.

"You know when I opened up the shop in Oklahoma City and got my first big contract, Me and Madeline took Jack and Linda out to a nice dinner at a good steakhouse in Oklahoma City," Dad told me. "I told Jack to order anything he wanted. Me and Madeline both had nice steaks. Jack ordered a hamburger. I laughed and said, 'Jack, you're at a steakhouse. You're supposed to get a steak.' He told me that he wanted a hamburger. So I said okay."

Dad thought that was crazy, but he remembers it fondly. The hamburger choice, though, was the kind of guy Jack was. He liked what he liked, and he was who he was. My dad and Jack always got along well. It was hard not to like Jack because he was a simple, country boy at heart, kind-hearted and loving.

I loved my uncle even as I witnessed the chains of his addiction getting heavier and heavier each year. He was so bound by it, and it broke my heart to watch his battle. His last day on Earth was just like any other day. He got up and went into the living room, turned the television to a show he wanted to watch and sat down on the couch.

"Old woman, get me a cup of coffee," he told her.

Aunt Linda was in the kitchen. When she walked into the living room to give him his coffee, he was leaning back on the couch with his eyes closed. She thought he was asleep. It took her a few minutes to realize that he was in his eternal sleep.

One moment he was there, and the next moment he was gone.

I hope my dad's last moments are that peaceful. I am glad that Jack had that, and I will miss him until the day I die.

Chapter 15: Uncle Mark

The only hillbilly men I know that aren't like my dad's family are the Owens. My Uncle Mark wasn't my uncle by blood, but I admired him more than any man I have ever met. He was married to Aunt Inez and raised my mother. Uncle Mark was such an entertainer and loved to tell stories and play his guitar or piano. He sung Blues and old Gospel songs. His greatest joy was being surrounded by people. Uncle Mark had been a principal and school superintendent. I had trouble picturing him as a principal because he was such a cut-up. I suspect at the time of his death that he was the oldest feminist and liberal in America. Like most hillbillies, he was a die-hard Democrat; however, he spurned the church—only speaking favorably of the Pentecostals.

"I like the holy-rollers. They got good music," he said to me when I told him that I was Assembly of God.

His love for music and his worship of Mark Twain inspired him to emulate Twain by ho-
boing down the Mississippi in his early twenties.

"You were a Ho-Bo?" I asked when he told me this as a young teenager. I pictured a homeless man on a street corner.

"Yes," he said with pride.

Hearing the note of pride and not shame, I asked, "Does that mean you were homeless?"

"A Ho-Bo is someone who makes their way by entertaining others, using their gifts to survive," he explained.

"So you played your guitar and sang?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "It was a grand ole time. I went all over the United States."

"Didn't you have to go to the War?" I asked. My mom had mentioned it once when my dad said he hated guns.

He nodded. "I enlisted," he said. "If you enlisted, you got to choose what you did. I was a paratrooper."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I spent the war jumping out of airplanes, testing the parachutes," he explained.

That seemed a crazy job to have to do. When I was older, I realized just how dangerous his job was. He basically spent all of WWII saving lives. Back then, I thought he never had to shoot anyone. Now, though, I realize that is probably unlikely as planes were often under fire. Still, I found him a brave and worthy role model.

Since he raised my mother, I never could understand how she ended up marrying a man like my dad, who was so different. However, they both were terrific storytellers. Dad, though, was greatly influenced by Pappy. Uncle Mark was influenced by Shakespeare, Twain, and Poe. A nihilist, he used to astound me with his agnosticism because it wasn't a common hillbilly trait.

"You can't *know* anything, Amy. You only *believe*," he told me.

"I *know* the Earth is round!" I exclaimed, maddened by his insane belief. It was only when I went to college that I began to understand the philosophies that guided his life.

Once when Mother disapproved of Dad's cut-your-own-switch philosophy, Dad mocked her. "You were never spanked as a child," he said in obvious disapproval.

I asked her if that was true.

"No, Uncle Mark didn't believe in paddling or spanking. But Grandma Reedy did, Aunt Ethel did, Aunt Mattie, and Aunt Laverne. I got spanked plenty!" she informed me. Because Mom was never legally adopted by Aunt Inez and Uncle Mark, all the aunts (her mother's sisters) felt they had equal right to raise and influence her as they saw fit. This meant they could discipline her as they wanted, too.

I asked Aunt Inez how Uncle Mark could be a principal without spanking. Spanking was very common throughout the country in the sixties and seventies. It is still common in conservative states like Oklahoma. Mom had told me about corporal punishment involving a yardstick and her hand even in high school, so I knew it was used in her hometown.

“No, Marcus never paddled. He couldn’t bear the thought of anyone striking a child. He was liked the Pied-Piper with those kids. They flocked to him, adored him, and followed him everywhere,” she shared.

“So, no one in his school got spanked or paddled?” I asked.

She grinned. “My sister Mattie and I did all the paddling,” she shared. They were both teachers. Aunt Inez taught math normally in the fourth grade.

“I bet he didn’t like that!” I said, laughing.

“No, he did not, but there were some kids that just needed to be swatted,” she said, a twinkle in her eye. I couldn’t imagine that any paddling she gave would hurt that much.

My mother told me that Uncle Mark abhorred violence of any kind. Once a bat found its way into their house when she was a child.

“We need to capture it and set it back outside,” Uncle Mark told his wife.

Aunt Inez, always pragmatic, was chasing it through the house with a broom. “No, Mark, I’m not going to capture it! I’m killing it!” she informed him. Then she brained the bat to death with her broom even as Uncle Mark protested. My mother told me that she will never forget how upset Uncle Mark was over the death of the bat. Yet that was the kind of man he was. The wild mountain cats that lived on his hillside wouldn’t let anyone near them. But I saw more than one of them eating out of Uncle Mark’s hand—even wild animals were drawn to him.

Uncle Mark was a special guy who treated women with a respect and reverence that was never found in the Click men. Dad believed in the traditional roles of women. They took care of the house, and the men the outside stuff, like fencing and feeding the animals. Once, Uncle Mark at age *ninety*, ran me out of the kitchen when I was starting to wash dishes.

“I’ll do these, Amy,” he said.

I looked at him in shock. “Uncle Mark, I can do these. It’s not that many,” I told him.

“No, you won’t. I will do them!” he insisted, standing at the sink and taking the sponge from me. It had been ingrained in me at an early age to never disobey an adult, especially not a senior citizen, so I let him wash the dishes.

I went to find Aunt Inez and told her what happened.

“Yes, he hates seeing anyone work when he’s not. It was all I could do to get him to let me help in the garden. He wouldn’t let Madeline or Thelma work at all,” she said.

“I’ve seen you do dishes,” I pointed out.

She nodded. “Yes, he can’t do everything. But if there’s nothing for him to do, and he sees me in the kitchen, he will do them for me,” she said.

Even though Uncle Mark raised his namesake Marky to be exactly like him—a renaissance man, he still had trouble allowing Marky to do things like fix the leaking roof.

“I’ll get to it when I start to feel stronger,” he said when he was ninety. A time or two, Aunt Inez would have to trick Uncle Mark to accompany her on an errand just so that Marky could do some necessary chores around the house. Uncle Mark was one of the most stubborn men in our family.

He one time confessed to me that he quit smoking and drinking early into his marriage with Aunt Inez.

"I thought once I'd write a book about how to quit," he told me once.

"Why didn't you? You were an English teacher and tell so many great stories. You should've wrote a book!" I told him.

"Every time I turned around, someone else had already written the book I wanted to write," he replied with a grin.

"So what made you quit?" I asked.

"I tried a few times to give up smokin'," he said, "but I didn't have any luck. Finally, I went to my father-in-law."

"Aunt Inez's daddy, Poppy Reedy?" I asked—that's the only name my mother ever used when talking about her grandpa.

He nodded. "I gave him my cigarettes and told him that I was going to quit, so I wanted him to throw them away for me," Uncle Mark shared. "But he stuck them on his mantle and said, 'I'll leave them right here 'cause I know you'll be back for them tomorrow.' That made me so mad that I never picked up another cigarette the rest of my life. He didn't think I could quit. I showed him!"

I laughed, enjoying his tale. His stubbornness in that instance paid off.

I don't think there are many hillbillies or men at all like Uncle Mark. Honestly, I know I have never met another man like him. Maybe that's why I am still single. I am looking for a man as wonderful as he was.

Chapter 16: To Belong *or Not*

So where do I fit in? Hillbilly? Redneck? Both? Even though I am comfortable around both groups of people, I do not believe I am either really—not entirely. Even though I do recognize qualities from both groups in myself, I don't feel either label would truly define who I am. Although I love my family and am not ashamed or embarrassed by their idiosyncrasies or even dysfunctionality in some cases, I am not them. As an educated, single, childless, Christian feminist, I am collage of contradictions. I belong with them because they are my family, but I stand apart.

I am the first person in my immediate family to get a bachelor's degree. I have one first cousin on my dad's side that went to college and earned a bachelor's and one first cousin that is a Nurse Practitioner, which means she earned a master's. I have no first cousins on my mother's side with a bachelor's degrees. My great aunt and uncle who raised my mom went to college to become teachers. Uncle Mark even earned a master's. Their son, my second cousin, married a woman with a master's. Their grandchildren, my third cousins, had genius level IQ's and went to college. Because both were so gifted in the computer sciences, I do not think they ever finished their degrees before finding lucrative employment. In fact, I must search the family tree hard to find relatives who even come close to my level of education. When I complete my second master's, I will have no educational equal in my entire family, going into third and fourth cousins. Eventually, I hope to begin a doctoral program—the very first in my family on both sides going through several degrees of cousins. My education that opens doors in so many circles serves to isolate me in my own family.

Consequently, I look at the world so differently than most people in my family. The veil of my education colors the way I view the world. It most definitely makes me very different

from my siblings. For instance, I work hard to keep my reputation in tact; my word means something to me. I face who I am even if it makes me uncomfortable. I have learned that a person can never really be the person their family believes they are. At the same time, only your family can truly know some parts of you. It is a strange paradox.

To a degree, my Christianity also sets me apart. Rednecks love Jesus and country. Hillbillies attend church a lot less than rednecks. However, I approached my faith as I did everything else, whole heartedly. This means I didn't experiment with drugs or alcohol like all my siblings or cousins. I have no dark addictions I struggle to be freed from. Unlike some of my siblings, I have not shared myself with every man or woman that struck my fancy. Nor have I ever cussed someone out in a fit of rage or physically assaulted someone. I have tried to emulate Christ and forgive. Consequently, I surrounded myself with likeminded people both in high school and college. There was no rebellion period. In a true Christian family, my restraint and sobriety would be applauded. In my family, it is sometimes looked upon with suspicion and derision.

Of course, the biggest mark upon both my Christianity and femininity is my long-standing desire to never reproduce. I have four younger siblings and spent all my childhood and teenage years babysitting and cleaning our house. Some eight-year-old girls play with dolls. I played and took care of my sister Kelly after school when she was two until my mom was home at eleven. Although I was great with kids both at church and in the home, I knew as a teenager that I would not have one myself. I had no desire to. Eventually, I became convinced that parenthood just equaled heartbreak. In some ways, my siblings were my children and were constantly disappointing me. It took me years to learn how to be a sibling to them and not a parent. Then they began reproducing and having children they cannot care for. Now I find

myself burdened with guardianship of my niece, Emily, while my youngest brother serves a twelve-year prison sentence. As much as I love her, I am bound by the chains of my commitment to her. My desire to pursue a Ph.D. in another state cannot easily occur due to this commitment. This does not make me angry, but it can be frustrating. Sometimes, I feel trapped by my family bonds.

My mother has never understood my desire to not have children. In our family, motherhood is the goal of all women. I have today more than one relative under twenty that has already had a baby or is pregnant—married or not. Having children so young, to me, is a life sentence of servitude. They will always struggle with poverty, never travel to fun or exotic locations—they won't get a college degree. Instead of beginning an exciting journey into adulthood, they are saddled with parental responsibilities and commitments to their time and finances. That is what happens in my family when members become parents so young. When I told my mother years ago that I did not ever want to be pregnant, her response was very clear.

“When you fall in love, you will feel differently,” she said.

She could never see that a desire for a big family immediately made a man unattractive to me. The last two men I dated and loved were appealing to me because it was not a goal of theirs either.

I tell my students that I am doing my part for mankind by not reproducing. Some people's DNA does not need to be spread around. Sure, a kid could end up like me. However, the odds are, he or she would end up like a sibling—angry, destructive, and an addict. I love my nephews and niece and are glad they exist even though my siblings cannot seem to care for them without a lot of family help. The great thing about being an aunt, however, is that I am not truly responsible for how they turn out. I can love and support them and model a life of good choices.

Nevertheless, if their choices take them to dark places, I can take comfort in the fact that I am *not* their mother.

Hillbillies, though, take family to a level most people groups do not. They will own a mountainside and have generations of family living, dying, and reproducing on the mountain. Although my dad's family on his mother's side sold out before he left, the tradition of family staying connected is so much a part of our DNA that it is impossible to sever the ties completely. No matter what is done to you by close family, you let it go. You can walk away for a time (I lived for five years in Chicago in bliss), but they will always find a way to pull you back in.

As exhausting as that can be, it's also comforting. No one can truly know you and what makes you you like your family. No one can make you laugh like your family. No one appreciates your jokes like your family. Although no one can make you as crazy or angry as your family, there is no one who can really be there for you the way your family can and will be. There are times, though, that the closeness in my family can be disturbing.

Over a decade or so ago, my mother was telling me a story her my Aunt Linda had told her. Aunt Linda had lived in these low-income apartments in OKC and loved living there because everyone knew her. It was a communal apartment that she thrived in and was on first name basis with all her neighbors. She had an incredibly giving spirit and generous heart, so people flocked to her. All who knew her were her friend. I know my cousin Melissa, the daughter closest to my age, told me about more than one friend growing up that considered Aunt Linda their second mother. After Melissa and her sister were adults, they lived there with their families off and on.

Aunt Linda told my mother a story about Melissa a year or so after she and my dad separated.

“Linda, told me that Melissa had a real bad toothache a few days ago,” Mom shared.

“That’s too bad,” I replied. Tooth decay is a common hillbilly problem—it's not just a negative stereotype.

“She was in so much pain that she left Tony and went and crawled in bed with her mama!” Mom said, impressed. Tony was the father of Melissa’s two youngest children. They could not get married because Tony was brought to America from Mexico when he was seven and had no papers. He was a very kind and hardworking man, a wonderful daddy. He and Melissa are still together after two decades and several children.

“That’s insane!” I said, shaking my head in disapproval. At the time, Melissa lived in a different apartment than her mother.

“I think that’s sweet! She was in such pain that she needed her momma!” Mom gushed.

“That’s disturbing! Talk about co-dependent!” I said in disapproval. I could not identify at all with anyone that needed a parent—or anyone—like that. The concept was foreign to me and made me extremely uncomfortable. I had been raised to be independent, taught to rely on myself to get things done. She had that expectation of me growing up, yet she now praised a niece that was my opposite. I guess my siblings and cousins have a much stronger familial bond—I stand apart.

“You only feel that way because you don’t love me as much as Melissa loves her mother,” Mom informed me.

I tried patiently to explain to Mother what was wrong with her analysis. “Mother, you raised an independent, capable daughter who doesn’t need you all the time. I’m healthy and

functional! Our relationship is *healthy*! My love for you should not be measured by whether or not I'd leave my husband's bed to go to yours!" I exclaimed.

She wasn't one to argue (that was my dad), so she said nothing further. However, it was obvious to me that she really did think my love was less because my need was less. Over the years, she has demonstrated that belief over and over. I have a few female cousins like myself on my mom's side of the family. My Aunt Linda was like that and raised her oldest daughter Michele to be like that. But she dominated and smothered her other daughters to such an extent that they could not function well without her. Since my aunt's premature death, her daughters have struggled to live a happy life without her. Of course, my opinion is based on how different my own relationship was with my mother. My sisters were always closer to my mother than I, but I would not say they were as close as Linda was with her daughters. What was weird to me, was normal to them. Maybe it is unnatural to not need a mother. Maybe I *am* the odd one. All I know for sure is that as the years pass, my mother and I have drifted further and further apart.

Hillbillies often have a strong matriarch that the family centers around. It was my Aunt Linda in Oklahoma and my Aunt Inez in Kentucky. Since their deaths, the family has been fractured and rarely gets together except for funerals. Hillbilly funerals are very different than the funerals I have attended in Oklahoma. Here the funerals are very churchlike and somber occasions. In the mountains, funerals are a time of celebration and remembrance. We laughed through Uncle Mark's funeral. Rednecks tend to be more patriarchal with the male as the center.

A few years ago, I was visiting my mother when she lived with her husband Steve. Steve fits nearly every hillbilly stereotype. He has dark hair longer than mine with an equally long beard. He is the most racist person I have ever encountered and a strong alcoholic. There is always a beer can in his hand. On this visit, there was no exception. I never stayed at their

house because I could barely tolerate the sight of him. I came in, then, unannounced. The scene was very strange—even by my family’s standards. Steve was sitting in a kitchen chair with the ironing board next to him. My mother was ironing his beard.

“What the heck are you doing?” I asked in shock.

“We’re getting ready for church,” my mother said as if that explained her actions as she calmly kept ironing his beard.

“My friend Bill died,” Steve said, taking a sip of the beer. “We’re going to church. I gotta look good!”

I stood there a full minute trying to wrap my mind around the scene. Finally, I said, “Don’t you think it’s more important that you be *sober*?” I asked incredulously.

Sobriety, though, is not a requirement for hillbillies. My mother told me that Steve even took a can of beer with him into the bathroom. If he was taking a bath, he would take two.

I will never understand my mother’s relationship with that man who was so very different from my father. I fervently kept hoping and praying for his premature death, but it never happened. Yes, my Christianity lapsed greatly in the face of my mother’s chosen companion. It was a great gift in 2016 when she finally broke it off from him and got her own place in Prestonsburg, which is out of the mountains, nearly forty minutes away from him. However, the damage her relationship to this man has done to our relationship is extensive.

Even though I do not consider myself to be either a true redneck or a hillbilly, I can understand both groups very well. I am at home with both groups. Both groups greatly amuse and challenge me. When I see signs of the redneck trait in Emily, I don’t despair, I laugh even as I correct her grammar.

"I didn't do nothin'!" she insists frequently.

"You didn't do *anything*," I correct.

"No, I didn't do *nothin'!*" she replies.

The other night we had a repeat of this same bit in the car on the way home. This time, she added, "I'm six and know what I'm talkin' about!"

I laughed and said, "You know I'm an English teacher, right? You got years of me correcting your grammar."

"Nut-uh," she replied as she shook her head.

"Don't you want to be smart like me?" I asked.

"No, I wanna be smart like Sherry!" she informed me.

No, it doesn't offend me or hurt my feelings that Emily prefers Sherry's company. Sherry *is* extraordinarily gifted with children. It does sometimes reinforce my feelings of isolation, however. Nothing I will ever do will be enough.

Yet the love exists. I love my family, and I know that they love me as best as they can. Some things, though, are innate inside of them. This is obvious to me when I look at Emily.

When she turned six last September, my dad asked her what she wanted to do for her birthday.

"If you could do anything for your birthday, Emmy, anything at all, what would you like to do?" he asked her.

She thought a minute. Then she looked at him and announced, "Play in mud!"

Yep, the redneck gene is alive and well.

THE END

