

Not Forgotten

Yesterday a Total Stranger Called me White Trash

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Yesterday a total stranger called me white trash. On my quiet suburban street walking my dogs. I guess the fact that it's a middle-class neighborhood was the reason he left off the "poor." Before being insulted for my family and my family's family, I was alternately amused, shocked, and wary. But the definite bottom-line question was: How did he know?

But first things first. I am a crossbreed of Irish-English settlers and black-Caribbean with some Native American thrown in to spice things up. I am brown, middle-aged, with curly hair and long arms. I was born and raised in a small mountain town in North Carolina. When a stranger calls me white trash, I am not confused or angry. I know I have been insulted, but I am simply amazed. This stranger, with superior visual sophistication had disregarded skin color, age, sex, and socioeconomic indicators to come up with his remark. Not to mention everything that I thought had been dissolved in me by my education, travel, and lifestyle. What in my body language, attitude, and personality made a complete stranger call me white trash? After all these years?

First mistake: I was wearing cutoff jeans, a man's shirt, a baseball cap, and cheap sandals. Walking my dogs. Emphasis on dogs, not dog. A car narrowly avoided hitting them, and I loudly took offense. A sure sign of white trash-ism: this concern over doglife. My second mistake was to remember the tired line heard in every movie, book, or educational video ever done about the South. I asked, through squinted eyes, "You live around here?" Half challenge, half certainty. When the man answered "No," I told him in no uncertain terms to "git on back" to where he came from. Fortunately, I refrained from adding that we didn't like his kind in our neck of the woods, er, burbs. Where did those words come from?

I finished with the dogs and roamed with my coffee around my house, subconsciously looking for other signs of my unmistakable regional identity. The bikes, secured not with a high-tech lock, but with a heavy link of hardware chain to the fence. (At least they're not Harleys.) The row of baseball caps? An apron? Plants in various stages of repair around the window ledges? An abundance of beer bottles in the recycling bin? There are pictures in old-fashioned original frames of long-dead ancestors proudly displayed. Well-worn work boots. A wooden cutout of a cow used as a decorative motif. A gun in the bedside drawer. A pickup truck in the carport. A hand-on-hips stance at my front door that states my red-blooded American right to all within my domain.

We all know that in the heat of argument, synapses scramble to locate the exact insulting phrase to deal a death blow to the enemy. It's survival. If appropriate, we would just as soon deliver a knockout punch. When the stranger spat out his epithet, slammed

his car door and sped off, he was confident that he had demolished his adversary, me, with his heinous words. Social scientists have pretty much figured out that when one resorts to any type of epithet, whether racial, sexual or ageist, it's usually because the speaker is on the ropes, so to speak. No other battle move is immediately available. But a verbal insult about something that is unavoidable is also not arguable. Yeah, well, I guess I am an old woman with cellulite. What's it to you?

Thinking on it, I realized that if you're of that sort of mind, I present a pretty large target for epithets. There is plenty about me that is unavoidable and perhaps offensive. The man could just as easily have said, "nigger," or "dyke bitch," or even "overaged hippie." And still hit home, sorta. Maybe with the first, he might have feared large T-shirted men with names like Mustafa; with the second, a large T-shirted woman named Chloe. He seemed to have little fear of scrawny T-shirted good ole boys named Jeb. My enemy, the stranger, instinctively went for an epithet with staying power. And one that he could get away with.

Certain forms of discrimination are more acceptable than others nowadays. In selected parts of the country, insults to women, senior citizens, and whites of the lower middle class are still penalty free. Stereotypes die hard, especially ones that are far removed from one's everyday experience.

I have spent a considerable time proving to myself and to the page that my forbears were landowning, proud, hard-working mountain people, far removed from the low-life, rent-paying layabouts that I saw in the town where I grew up. We didn't have cars on blocks; no hound dogs running on ropes barking night and day; the men didn't work the fields and drink away the cash on payday; we owned the house that I was born in. I assumed that people born in the resplendent beauty of the mountains were out of the loop as far as white trash-ism went. The same with "cracker" or "redneck," epithets reserved for folks on the plains, lowlands, the Real South. They were the throwbacks to the era of plantations, slavery, terrible economic conditions, and hard religion. My people were arrogant, individualistic, isolation-prone, violent, scarce-with-words folks of the mountains.

But that's obviously putting too fine a point on it. The stranger who insulted me lived in a more upscale neighborhood. So, while he was visually astute, he just couldn't be expected to know the differences between "country," "hillbilly," "mountain tramp," "shiners," and "white trash." These distinctions escape a lot of folks it seems. To him, casualness of attire, arrogance, and sassiness about dogs and my little plot of land could only be white trash-ism.

I know there was more working inside me as I walked my dogs that morning. More that I was saying to the world by how I carried myself, the language out of my mouth, the willfulness of my responses. We are who our mothers and fathers were, our granddaddies and great aunts, somehow. Somewhere in the wiggle of genes. The grace of a gesture. The lift of an eyebrow. And if I can't hide it, with genetics, intellect, age, then so be it. White Trash-ism.

But it stills bugs me a little; just what was the definite giveaway sign? Was it my scuffed sandals? My baseball cap worn brim front, not backwards like the fashion? Hell, it musta been them three mangy-lookin' dogs of mine.