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16 September 2019

Mountain Folk Talk

I was sixteen years old when I found out my great grandmother's real name. Grandma Toadie Reel was a five-foot-tall, feisty spit-fire who kept a wooden cutting board on her hip, ready to tune up any of her grandbabies who were acting out of line. On the day of her funeral they introduced her as Katherine "Toadie" Reel. That was the very first time her name hit my ears. Everyone from the mountain has a nickname to pair with their God-given last names. My papaw is called "Fiddle" for his ability to play any instrument that has more than three strings. My grandma is called "Mam-Mam" because she is respected and expects a "yes ma'am, no ma'am" response at all times. My momma always told me that my Mam hated the name Sydney from the moment she signed it on my birth certificate. Therefore, I'm referred to as "Sis Lyons." It's upsetting that I didn't get a say in this choice, but that's the way it goes at home: it's a part of our culture.

I grew up with little knowledge of what was the truth and what was a story. My family told things in a series of tall tales to teach about our values, give advice, and warn us of the dangers of the mountain. I was advised to mind my momma and my manners if I wanted to find a nice boy in the hills. Quirky advice is whispered between families. One family says to soak a baby's binky in moonshine to numb the gums and help with teething. My grandparents advise to "empty y'all's freezers in the winter and stick market groceries on the porch once winter sets. That'away you can conserve power once the lines go out." One of my favorite pieces of advice is to turn enough bread dough to feed a neighbor. When the women in my family congregate to bake bread and can apple butter in the fall, enough is made to feed a neighbor. Aside from it being a good deed, we will trade for the goods that neighbors produce.

Growing up in Appalachia has influenced the way I speak, the things that I say, and how I see things in other's language. Elk Garden is tucked away on top of the Allegheny Mountain in the eastern panhandle of West Virginia. My entire family resides in Elk Garden. In fact, my parents grew up across the street from each other. My dad says that my momma was the prettiest girl in town, but that he didn't have many to choose from. I lived in the house that my momma grew up in for my entire life. My dad lives right next door, although they are divorced. My dad's family is Cherokee, Italian, and Irish. My momma's side is Polish. Both sides of my family speak English--apart from my late great grandma Neva who was from Sicily, Italy. She spoke Italian and English. I never got to pick up any of my great grandma Neva's Italian because she passed when I was six years old. I can remember her laying my baby sister on the kitchen table and saying she was "pretty as a peach." I also remember her handing me teacups of coffee and whispering not to tell my momma because "she doesn't have all of her bolts tight and won't understand why a growing girl needs a little coffee." Her daughter, my grandma Brenda, knows a few phrases in Italian but only uses them when she's frustrated or cussing in public. I benefitted from both sides of my family's diverse ethnic backgrounds because of the array of cooking styles that I grew up learning. I have homemade noodle recipes memorized and can turn dough like a machine. My family farms and works in the mines for a living, making me the first to attend college. My papaw thinks I'll never come home because I'll be "too smart to settle with Elk Garden."

I picked up a lot of my family's language growing up because we were always together and rarely apart. Their twang is a lot different from the traditional southern accent that many associate with being from the country. The men in my family don't finish a lot of their words. They mumble through sentences hoping to get their point across the first time, especially my papaw. When they aren't

understood, they get frustrated and repeat themselves aggressively, which makes it that much harder to translate their speech. An example of this mumble would be how my papaw says the word “Ohio.” Instead of enunciating all of the letters in the word, he quickly spits out “Oh-hia.” My husband is from the valley in our region and nearly goes cross-eyed trying to translate a conversation with my papaw. I’ve gotten used to it over the years, but anyone from out of town would have a hard time understanding. I speak fast, which mirrors their mumble, and I try hard to slow down, especially when speaking in front of a group. The women in my family also speak differently than most people who aren’t from our town. They draw out their vowel sounds, especially the ‘I’ in words like right, like, might, high, and by. They also speak very loudly, and it almost seems like yelling. Getting a phone call from home is always grounds for turning my phone volume down a few notches to protect my ear drums. No matter the context, it’s going to be a loud conversation.

I never thought about how I sounded because everyone around me growing up sounded alike. My elementary school was right up the street from me and all five of my classmates and I lived within walking distance of one another. My town is on the boarder of two counties, Grant and Mineral. Grant County is mainly a farming town with a small educational complex that graduates six to ten students each year. Mineral County is a larger county containing Keyser High School, which is about thirty-five minutes away from my hometown. I got the choice to be bussed down the mountain everyday to go to the “better” school or to walk to the closer school. I decided to go to Keyser High School because I really wanted to play sports and Keyser had more to offer. Everyone at Keyser High School classified people from the mountain as dangerous, different, and dumb. My teachers even called me the “mountain girl” and when I made any kind of headline for basketball, my coaches referred to me in the same way. My senior year, my cousin and I were both up for the Katherine Church Award Scholarship. The headline in the *Mineral County News Tribune* was “Elk Garden Girls Up for Church Award, Making the Mountain Proud.” That headline is still hanging on my momma’s fridge. The mountain *was* proud, but I felt like I was being mocked because of where I was from. It is offensive to be thought of as the “other” in that situation, as if they didn’t think I was capable of winning.

I never thought about being seen differently because I wasn’t directly from Keyser, but I was always classified as a separate entity. When I spoke in social settings, some peers would repeat my sentences in an over-exaggerated southern accent that was nothing like my own. It was agitating but usually harmless. When I would get fired up and start speaking in my native accent, the people who supported me the most still found ways to undermine and belittle me as a person. My dearest friend was from Keyser and used to mimic me, saying “I’m Sydney Lyons, I’m from the mountain, and I’m country as hell.”

If people from Keyser were cruel, I wondered how big-city people from Morgantown would speak to me. The day that I moved to Morgantown felt like I was being separated from my family forever. I didn’t want to make friends and feared rejection more than anything. I drove home every weekend and cried almost every day. When I began college, I noticed that I altered my speech a lot when having to give oral reports or when speaking to a professor. I wanted to sound as educated as possible and spoke slower and more thoughtfully. Moving away from home only made me pick up on my family’s accents when I returned to Elk Garden. I noticed how different they sounded in comparison to a peer who was from Texas. My family has more of an Appalachian accent than a southern accent, although the two often get mixed up. When I go home for a long weekend or winter break, my family makes fun of how much my accent has changed. They associate it with being more educated and act as if I am better than them because I moved away for college. On the other end of the spectrum, when I

come back to college, I can hear my accent more when I'm around my peers from Morgantown. I must remind myself to tone it down until I fall back into place. I work at a paint store part time to help pay for school. At work my co-workers call me a cowgirl and point out the way that I say things. One customer, a Morgantown native, always asks me to repeat myself when I give him his total. When I read out "nineteen ninety-nine" he slows it down and overexaggerates the 'I' vowel and chuckles. I don't catch it when I pronounce words that way, but others hear it. I never considered that I sounded different until it was pointed out so many times.

I have to try to refrain from using some of the slang terms that are in my automatic vocabulary when speaking or writing in certain social settings. A few obvious ones are "ain't" and "y'all." A few terms that I use in relaxed conversations are "holler" instead of "yell," "yonder" instead of "over there," "right directly" instead of "now," "dandy" instead of "good," "fixin" instead of "going" and many others. These terms wouldn't be acceptable in a formal essay or conversation with someone of power. It may make me sound uneducated or lazy with my words. I wasn't fully aware of this until I got my first freshman essay back and it was full of red ink. I wrote essays like a stream of consciousness without many periods or punctuation, exactly how I spoke. I used vocabulary that wasn't acceptable and quickly had to form an academic voice.

My junior year of college I took an Appalachian Fiction course. The books that we read felt very familiar while I was reading them. Some of my classmates had a terrible time with the choppy language and the strange use of terms. They ended up hating some of the books we read just based on the language. I didn't have a completely easy time with all the books, but I connected to most. We read *Storming Heaven* by Denise Giardina. It was about Kentucky and the coal mining wars in West Virginia. The language was familiar because I am from a coal mining family. I learned so much about what my pap does every day for work and knew that it was a book my grandma would love. She read the novel in a few weeks and said she was very comfortable with books of that context. I believe that we both enjoyed it so much because we didn't have to take extra time to look up terms and phrases because we were used to them already. That class opened up my curiosity for Appalachian studies and I am now taking a Women in Appalachia course. These courses help me to grasp my background and understand how much of a melting pot Appalachia is. There are so many ethnic backgrounds that contributed to the population of this region and it has helped me to understand why our dialect is separate from others.

I am proud of where I come from and it's my favorite thing to talk about. My town is tiny but there is so much culture and love that goes into it. I never took the time to cherish my upbringing because I was living it. It took me a long time to get to school each day, my family had old fashioned morals, and I wasn't exactly like everyone in school. I should've taken advantage of my upbringing when I was living it, but it is still nice to reflect on how thankful I am to be an Appalachian native. Dialects tell a story about where you are from and how one dialect is different from others. My main goal is to finish school and show every single kid on the mountain that my reality is not unachievable.