

## Southern (dis)Comfort

It took a long time for me to love the South.

It would be a lot easier if every single person in the South was a lost cause. It would be a lot easier if cutting off the South meant getting rid of every racist, every bigot, and every sinner within the United States borders. It would be a lot easier if this wasn't my home and orange blossoms didn't split my skin open and make me bleed all over my mother's clean kitchen floor. But it's not easy to get rid of. People have tried. Lord knows I have.

Not much of Florida registers as "Southern" for most people, and most of the time, they're right. But my town is in the sweet spot of just enough churches on one road and just enough swamp to cut off your neighbors that we've escaped the phenomenon most Floridians experience where culture is lost under the waves of tourists and snowbirds.

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Nature was the easiest part to appreciate. It's really a beautiful place if you don't mind the skeeters and an odd snake slithering over your toes, the sun heavy on the back of your neck, and freckles on collarbones commonplace. Spanish moss drips off the trees around my house and the shade pools in cool spots along the road as I walk to the pond near my home. It feeds into Lake Apopka, the water just beyond the trees growing at its edge spreading as far as you can see, almost too bright to look at when the light reflects off the horizon. When the storms come, I can watch them from that dusty dirt path by the pond, the dark clouds rumbling and sparking on the skyline as they approach. The rain is an approaching gray sheet, and when I sprint back to my porch it nips on my heels as the pavement scrapes up my bare feet. The sting is exhilarating, and

the first claps of thunder drown out my laughter as I pant on the ground behind the porch screen, the rain just missing me on the edges of the dusty concrete.

This part was easier to love. The hurricanes are unforgiving, but mine isn't a neighborhood that is willing to evacuate, so we just grill all the meat in our freezers beforehand and share hot dogs with the neighbors. None of us will have power for days afterward but our bathtubs are full of water and Stacy's got extra canned lasagna, so we'll be just fine.

It's easy to love a place like this when you see it after a hurricane. Frogs are leaping from each new tiny ecosystem of sitting water and branches block doorways and streets. It's quiet, the pavement is cool under my toes, and there are thirty minutes until the next rains come so there's just enough time to walk to the gas station and buy a bag of salt and vinegar chips. I can sit on my driveway like this for hours, my hands dry and rubbing on the uneven asphalt and squinting up at the sun feeling my face burn slowly. I let the skin heat up until it's almost unbearable and I have to look away, and as the freckles form on my cheeks and the thunder starts to rumble again in the distance I think "I am alive. I am alive. I am alive," and that is enough. This is the easiest part to love.

It's a lot harder to love the people here. It took me a long time, my own accent long gone from spending four years as a child up north with my father, to let vowels slip through my teeth to match my friends and lean into "y'all" like the familiar door it was, the wood rough from years of little hands scrabbling it open.

The doorknob was in a different place when I came back, and when I tried it the first few times it was locked. These people are stubborn, they won't open the door to just anyone. It's what happens when you live in one of the most dangerous places in the country – You learn to check the peephole first. But as I let my words get softer around the edges, so did they.

There is an odd kind of community here. Families have lived here since the first houses were built decades ago on an endless swamp, the buildings the same shade of pink since they were built three generations ago. You can't really gentrify a place like this, where the houses

have long been owned, not leased, and the people will just as quick spit on your shoes as they will invite you inside for dinner. These people are set in their ways. They go to church on Sunday, they say “yes ma’am” and “no sir” like they were taught, like they will teach their children, and they’ll fight anyone who tells them that this way is the wrong one. It is so easy to write it off. I did.

“Look at these people”, you think. “So against change that they’ll never catch up with progress”. And in some instances, it’s true. These are the things that sharpened my words and made me hate the place I was born with vitriol. These are the things that made it easy to listen to the other children up north asking why I talked funny and believing their parents when they told me I should be grateful I didn’t live in that horrid place anymore.

It’s really hard to love people when they tell you that “You’re goin’ through a phase” and that you shouldn’t wear a suit to prom “Cause what’ll people start to think then?” But I never let it stop me. I was an angry child and one that wouldn’t take no for an answer, not when it really mattered. I cut my hair and wore the ugliest cargo shorts known to man because damned what everyone else thought. I declared that I was going to go to college. And on top of that, I was going to go to college for *creative writing* no less. I spent high school fielding stares and slurs, baring my teeth at anyone who got close. I was different, and different was wrong according to mothers and teachers and pastors.

It’s easy to write off the South when it beats you when you’re already down, a kick in the ribs following the blood on your knees after you’ve already tripped and fallen off your bike. So I learned how to skateboard instead. Taught myself behind the dumpster of the apartment my mom and I lived in at the time, hands bloody and teeth gritted, unwilling to give up.

It is such a deeply Southern thing, to refuse to stand down when you’re half-dead and choking on your own vomit, everyone around you telling you to kneel because that’s the polite thing to do. I don’t know when “good Southern manners” was a thing people started expecting from us. Sure, we’ll smile at you on the street and hold the door open for you, but this is a

kindness that has been earned kicking and screaming all the way there. If I had not been raised the way I was, where I was, winters hot and summers hotter, I would not have made it this far. I would have killed myself in high school like the boy in our band's clarinet section, no one quite sure how to mourn me when they weren't all that sad that I was gone in the first place. It is easier to hate people you don't understand, and we all tend to look for the easiest thing to do, after all. But anywhere in this country people would have told me my identity made me a sin. And anywhere in this country I would have been denied my basic human rights, threatened and knocked down in school hallways. It's not as though Christians disappear the farther north you get. But I was raised in the South, and here it's the getting up that matters. Some people hated me and didn't understand me and were terrified of what I represented, but *bless their hearts* they couldn't have done fuck-all to stop me.

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People forget the history of the South often. They forget where our communities came from, and how we've managed to last this long. It is an easy thing to do, when we are the villains in history books and not much more. But the Stono rebellion, the largest rebellion organized by enslaved people in the history of colonial America, was in South Carolina. And in the Appalachian Mountains, pocket towns full of people looking down the barrel of the U.S. government's gun are the only reason unions exist. And Florida has laws that force information to be public, police reports and government files open to citizens to read. It is accountability that nowhere else upholds kindly named the "Sunshine Laws". The aggressive gentleness that holds a promise of retribution behind it, teeth sharp if we ever need to bite back. These are things that Southern children are raised knowing. It is only because of this that my backbone grew as straight as it did.

This is the way I learned to love the South. It is a desperate kind of love for something that's getting closer and closer to its last death rattle, with the rest of the country firmly ostracizing it. It is insufferable, these conversations people have about my home. They speak of the South with such hate for something that is a part of the same country as them. They laugh at jokes about incest and homophobia, and the government laughs at education money and medical aid, and all I want to do is ask what they thought was going to happen. This is the outcome of decades spent ignoring the cries for help from communities because of the state they're in, assuming their struggle is their own damn fault. Shouldn't have been inbred and dumb, I suppose.

People are surprised that the states down here vote a certain way. They wonder aloud how Ron DeSantis could have ever been elected to represent anybody, disdain and pity pitching their voices low. This is their excuse for their willful ignorance. But they forget that the Migration Policy Institute estimated that 772,000 people living in Florida are undocumented. That these people are not allowed to vote. The constant voter suppression of Black Floridians is conveniently ignored because it is so much easier to simply hate the state itself. The same people will talk about systemic oppression and still turn their backs on the South as though the system only extends as far as their own state. It's just not worth the effort I guess.

Sometimes though, there is an "effort" made by some left-leaning politician or another to "save us." They come down from D.C. without any understanding of the communities they are speaking to, assuming that they are smarter than the people they are trying to get to vote for them. They speak down the communities that are years older than them, surviving mostly through spite and blue-collar work, and these people listening, they aren't idiots. They understand when someone is calling them stupid behind their smile. It's a language they came up with in the first place. And all I want to ask is "*What did you think was going to happen?*"

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I have been offered “thoughts and prayers” from more outsiders than from Floridians that knew the same kids as me that were gunned down at that high school in Parkland. People apologize about it, shoulders stiff and eyes averted because they don’t know what to do in a situation like this. It is uncomfortable to be confronted with the consequences of their actions. It is uncomfortable to listen to me speak about Gina, knowing that she was killed before she was 18, left gasping on her own blood on dirty tiles because the system couldn’t be bothered to do something about how we treat firearms in the South, or anywhere in the U.S. They feel bad that this is an issue that they have pushed to other people’s shoulders because it may not have been as bad in their hometown. Gina was in winter guard. I knew her from competitions, years spent at the same schools against the same people for the same prize. I didn’t get to compete against her my senior year, but I would have liked to see her again, she was beautiful to watch.

My own winter guard team never offered thoughts and prayers to those who knew her. The kids who grow up like this, waiting for the day they have to send that dreaded text to their parents in a dark classroom, some girl they don’t know hugging them and crying because her sister is two halls over where they heard gunshots and she doesn’t know if she’s alive, we don’t have to do that shit. Instead, we just wrote stacks and stacks of letters talking about how good Gina was at flag, that we remembered her at our last show, and that we wouldn’t forget her pointed toes and unbridled joy. Anything to say “We’re crying in the bathroom after third period because we loved the same sport as her and she’ll never get to do it again” and “None of us can do anything and the helplessness makes us so *angry*” and “We see you. We see you. We see you.” without actually having to. It was easier.

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I don’t know how to convince others to love the South. I’m not sure I even *should*.

It is hard to explain to people the specific gender euphoria in shitty T-shirts with the sleeves cut off when they never grew up in a neighborhood where they spent summers on their friend's pool deck, laying on the cold surface and watching him wear the exact same thing, the back stained with pool water as we basked in 100-degree heat like the lizards stuck to the pool screen. I thought he was the most beautiful person I had ever seen as he taught me how to swear in Spanish and called me "gringo" affectionately, the sun burning his nose and glowing on the ends of his hair. It is hard to explain what it was like growing up alone for breakfast and lunch, mothers out at work, but being raised with six other neighborhood kids, fighting for a spot at the dinner table of whoever's house you all ended up at that night, parents switching off like clockwork that just happened to match the time they got paid. It is hard to explain the importance of sharing food to me now, because of it.

It is easier to not tell my friends what exactly it means when I make them pasta that I bought myself, not caring if there are leftovers because we are eating it now, together. It is easier to avoid talking about winter guard because someone might realize why I don't get out of bed sometimes on Feb. 14. It is easier to avoid talking about high school altogether because I also don't get up on Jan. 14 either. This is when Zach, the boy from marching band, killed himself.

Sometimes I'm not sure if *I* should love the South.

I loved these people. But it didn't change anything. It didn't save anyone. Most of the time, there wasn't anything I could have done about it. But it matters that the love was there. It mattered that my mother decided she liked this state enough to raise me here and stick to it. It mattered that I was raised with Southern care, the kind that doesn't give a damn about who you are as long as you kiss your mama when you leave the house and you appreciate a good sunset now and then. It matters that some of the first memories I have are learning how to walk silently in the dry grass, holding my breath to watch a gator blink slowly back at me only a few feet away as the sun reflects its golden eyes and water dries off its leathery skin and I think "I am

alive. I am alive. I am alive.” It is easy to forget these things when so many people don’t understand this place.

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I wish that these people who hate my home had skinned their knees in the same way I did as a child. I wish that they grew up learning to swim through waves in the ocean, saltwater stinging their eyes and throats rather than on the benign waters of a lake. I wish that they weren’t scared of gators and knew what water moccasins looked like, and thought that the sunlight shining through the Spanish moss was pretty. I wish that their favorite childhood memory was also one where they lost their friend’s lighter climbing through a giant oak tree downed across the dirt road after a hurricane, the thunder still rumbling in the distance as they giggled at matching scratches and the mud between their toes, knowing that when they got home they would get to read together in the dark by candlelight. Maybe then people wouldn’t hate the South the way they do now.

It is so easy to hate a place like this. It is ugly at first, with too much heat, unforgiving weather, and worse politics. It is easy to assume that the people here are stupid. They hate change, they hate progress, and a lot of times, it seems like it can’t be worth it. It is messy to live here, and traumatic, knowing so many people who never made it past high school, knowing that you almost didn’t either. You get sunburns on the way to work and rained on on the way home. It is hard to love a place like this. But then I watch black clouds spark in the sky just past my window, the rain crashing down as though my entire world has taken a deep breath out, letting everything go with it. I bury my fingers in my cat’s fur and the thunder shakes my walls. It says “You are alive. You are alive. You are alive.”

It takes work to love this place. But I was raised in the South, so I’ve never been afraid to get my hands dirty.