

## You Can't Kill the Rooster

*He'll never hold elected office or own more than one sport coat, but you won't find anyone more loyal than my younger brother*

By David Sedaris | Jun 1, 1998

When I was young, my father was transferred, and our family moved from western New York State to Raleigh, North Carolina. IBM had relocated a great many northerners, and, together, we made relentless fun of our new neighbors and their poky, backward way of life. Rumors circulated that locals ran stills out of their toolsheds and referred to their house cats as "good eatin'." Our parents coached us never to use the titles ma'am or sir when speaking to a teacher or shopkeeper. Tobacco was acceptable in the form of a cigarette, but should any of us experiment with plug or snuff, we would be automatically disinherited. Mountain Dew was forbidden, and our speech was monitored for the slightest hint of a Raleigh accent. Use the word y'all and, before you knew it, you'd find yourself in a haystack French-kissing an underage goat. Along with grits and hush puppies, the abbreviated form of "you all" was a dangerous step on an insidious path leading straight to the doors of the Baptist church.

We might not have been the wealthiest People in town, but at least we weren't one of them.

Our family remained free from outside influence until 1968, when my mother gave birth to my brother, Paul, a North Carolina native who has since grown to become both my father's best ally and worst nightmare. Here was a child who, by the time he had reached second grade, spoke much like the toothless fishermen casting their nets into Albemarle Sound. This is the thirty-year-old son who now phones his father to say, "Motherfucker, I ain't seen pussy in so long I'd throw stones at it."

My brother's voice, like my own, is high-pitched and girlish. Telephone solicitors frequently ask to speak to our husbands, and room-service operators appease us by saying, "That shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes, Mrs. Sedaris." The Raleigh accent is soft and beautifully cadenced, but my brother's is a more complex hybrid, informed by his professional relationships with marble-mouthed, deep-country laborers and his abiding love of hardcore rap music. He talks so fast, 'you find yourself concentrating on the gist of his message rather than trying to decipher the actual words. It's like speaking to a foreigner and understanding only the terms motherfucker, bitch, and hoss and the phrase "You can't kill the Rooster."

"The Rooster" is what Paul calls himself when he's feeling threatened. Asked how he came up with that name, he says only, "Certain motherfuckers think they can fuck with my shit, but you can't kill the Rooster. You might can fuck him up sometimes, but, bitch, nobody kills the motherfucking Rooster. You know what I'm saying?"

It often seems that my brother and I were raised in two completely different households. He's eleven years younger than I am, and by the time he reached high school, the rest of us had all left home. When I was young, we weren't allowed to say "shut up," but by the time Paul reached his teens, it had become acceptable to shout, "Shut your motherfucking mouth." The drug laws had changed as well. "No smoking pot" became "No smoking pot in the house," before it finally petered out to "Please don't smoke any pot in the living room."

My mother was, for the most part, delighted with my brother and regarded him with the bemused curiosity of a brood hen discovering she has hatched a completely different species. "I think it was very nice of Paul to give me this vase," she once said, arranging a bouquet of wildflowers into the skull-shaped bong my brother had left on the dining-room table. "It's nontraditional, but that's the Rooster's way. He's a free spirit, and we're lucky to have him."

Like most everyone else in our suburban neighborhood, we were raised to meet a certain standard. My father had dreams of me becoming a great athlete and attending an Ivy League college. While I was happy to bottle and diaper my first football, I had no interest in actually throwing the thing. My grades were average at best, and eventually I learned to live with my father's disappointment. Fortunately, there were six of us children, and it was easy to get lost in the crowd. My sisters and I managed to sneak beneath the wire of his expectations, but I worried about my brother, who was seen as the family's last hope.

From the age of ten, Paul was being dressed in Brooks Brothers suits and tiny red clip-on ties. He endured soccer camps, church-sponsored basketball tournaments, and after-school sessions with well-meaning tutors who would politely change the subject when asked about the Rooster's chances of getting into Yale or Princeton. Fast and well-coordinated, Paul never minded sports just so long as he was either stoned or winning. School failed to interest him on any level, and he considered it an accomplishment to receive an occasional D-minus. His response to my father's impossible and endless demands has, over time, become something of a mantra. Short and sweet, repeated at a fever pitch, it goes simply, "Fuck it," or, on one of his more articulate days, "Fuck it, motherfucker. That shit don't mean fuck to me."

My brother politely ma'ams and sirs all strangers but refers to friends and family, his father included, as either bitch or motherfucker. Friends are appalled at the way he speaks to his only remaining parent. The two of them recently visited my sister Amy and me in New York City, and we celebrated with a dinner party. When my father complained about his aching feet, the Rooster set down his two-liter Mountain Dew and removed a fistful of prime rib from his mouth, saying, "Bitch, you need to have them ugly-ass bunions shaved down is what you need to do. But you can't do shit about it tonight, so lighten up, motherfucker."

All eyes went to my father, who chuckled, saying only, "I guess you have a point."

A stranger might reasonably interpret my brother's language as a lack of respect and view my father's response as a kind of shameful surrender. This, though, would be missing the subtle beauty of their relationship.

My father is the type who will recite a bawdy limerick by saying, "A woman I know who's quite blunt / Had a bear trap installed in her..." oh, you know. It's a base, vernacular term for the female genitalia." He can absolutely kill a joke. When pushed to his limit, this is a man who shouts, "Fudge!" and sometimes follows it with a shake of his fist and a hearty "G. D. you!" I've never heard him curse, yet he and my brother seem to have found a common language that eludes the rest of us.