

LEWIS GRIZZARD, I STILL MISS YOU

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Lewis McDonald Grizzard, Jr. was an American writer and humorist, known for his southern demeanor and commentary on the American South. He was also a great American. Although he spent his early career as a newspaper sportswriter and editor, becoming the Sports Editor of the *Atlanta Journal* at age 23, he is much better known for his humorous newspaper columns in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. He was also a popular stand-up comedian and lecturer. I still miss him.

So, you might ask, why a paper on Lewis Grizzard? Well, first of all, how can you not like a guy who says things like, "Instead of getting married again, I'm going to find a woman I don't like and give her a house"; or "I grew up in a very large family in very small house. I never slept alone until after I was married." And finally, "Life is a lot like a dog sled race. If you ain't the lead dog, the scenery never changes."

For a man who spent so much time recovering from so many operations; a man who had so many close calls before the last one, Lewis Grizzard never seemed very interested in "the great beyond" except to hope "Heaven doesn't

run out of Camel cigarettes and fried chicken.” He wrote about illness and hospitals often enough in his books and columns, but the last sentence of his last book gives a better clue to his real passion: “Life, I do love that word.” Lewis Grizzard did live life and how he did live: 4 wives, syndication in 450 daily newspapers across the country, millions of fans, oceans of booze, and at the beginning and the end of it all, Moreland, Georgia. Always Moreland, Georgia, the tiny town that time seemingly forgot and that Lewis often embellished.

“I am,” he would say, “the only person from Moreland, Georgia who ever made the *New York Times* Best Seller List....come to think of it, I am the only person in Moreland, Georgia who ever HEARD of the *New York Times* Best Seller List.” It was his Mayberry, his Lake Woebegone. Like Mark Twain before him, Lewis Grizzard used the scenes of his youth to weave tales that were always truth, even when they weren’t exactly fact. Like Mark Twain, Lewis Grizzard made us laugh and think at the same time.

Lewis Grizzard and I share many common bonds, and perhaps that’s why I was drawn to his writing and humor after graduating from the University of Georgia. We were both the sons of U.S. Army officers. We were both graduates and diehard fans of the University of Georgia. And, finally, we

both share an abiding love for dogs, golf and good bourbon.

Lewis was born in Fort Benning, Georgia. His father, Lewis Grizzard, Sr., an officer in the United States Army, left his mother, Christine, a school teacher, when Lewis was young, and the mother and son moved in with Christine's parents in Moreland, Georgia where Lewis would spend the rest of his childhood. Lewis recounted his often frustrating relationship with his father in *My Daddy Was a Pistol, and I'm a Son of a Gun*. Years later, he penned his homage to "Miss Christine", his long-suffering, tough, school-teacher mother entitled, *Don't Forget to Call Your Mama – I Wish I Could Call Mine*. Together, these two books form the bookends to the entire Grizzard library.

To note that Lewis Grizzard was a graduate of the University of Georgia may seem a bit like noting that the sky is blue. For the benefit of the uninitiated, however, it must be said here. Bulldog to the bone, he later pulled off one of the great feats in syndicated newspaper history: that of publishing an almost entirely empty column. It was the day after his beloved alma mater had lost a game with hated rival, Georgia Tech. Lewis wrote one sentence. The sentence read, "Frankly, I don't want to talk about it." The rest of his allotted column space was blank. His ashes (half of them anyway)

were, in accordance with his final wishes, scattered over the 50-yard line at Georgia's Sanford Stadium.

Many of you may recall one of Lewis's favorite jokes. It was the Alabama-Georgia game and two die-hard fans, Bubba and Earl, were taking in the pageantry of Sanford Stadium: the startlingly green grass, the neatly-trimmed hedges, the beautiful co-eds, and of course the Bulldogs' mascot, a white English bulldog, Uga. Uga sauntered out to the middle of the field during the pre-game, sat down and, like dogs often do, began to lick his private parts. Earl turned to Bubba and said, "Man, I'd give anything if I could do that" to which Bubba quickly replied, "Earl, that dog would bite you!"

Lewis would often say, "I'm Bulldog born, Bulldog bred, and when I die, I'll be by-God Bulldog dead." He once said that while in between marriages, he considered placing a classified personal ad seeking a UGA coed with whom he could attend football games because "she would not think that getting down on one's knees and barking at a Clemson fan was odd behavior."

Grizzard, while at Georgia, was a member of the Sigma Pi fraternity and the Gridiron Secret Society. He studied journalism, but shunned the school newspaper in favor of the independent *Athens Daily News*. After graduating with a B.A. in Journalism in 1968, Lewis moved on to Atlanta, joining the

Atlanta Journal and became the youngest ever Executive Sports Editor of the *Journal* at the age of 23. His time there included the Marshall University football team tragedy and the *Journal's* coverage of Hank Aaron's 715th home run.

Lewis then left to become the Executive Sports Editor at the *Chicago Sun-Times*. He would later recall this as the most miserable period of his life. Lewis liked to say he was held prisoner there. His tenure included a controversy involving the removal of several columns written by Lacey Banks, the *Sun-Times's* first African-American sports columnist, from the newspaper, which resulted in Banks charging racism against Grizzard and led to Banks' subsequent firing. Grizzard was criticized as being racially insensitive. For his part, Lewis pointed out that he had replaced Banks with Thom Greer, a writer who was also African-American. As one commentator noted, Grizzard had been pronounced "guilty by geography". Lewis' career as a newspaper man in Chicago, including his thoughts on living in the North, is recalled in *If I Ever Get Back to Georgia, I'm Gonna Nail My Feet to the Ground*.

In 1977, Lewis returned to Atlanta as a columnist for the sports section of the *Atlanta Constitution* paper. After 8 months, he switched to writing the humor/life column that would eventually make him famous. He published this

column for 4 days a week. At his peak, he was syndicated in 450 newspapers.

Lewis loved the newspaper business. He loved the sound of the old typewriters clicking, the copy room floor littered with discarded rewrites, the pressure of deadlines, and the beer or two or three at the bar down the street after it was all over. When asked why he didn't use a computer to write his column, he would say, "When I write, I like to hear some noise."

He ticked off a lot of people during the glory years by having the effrontery to write what he thought, and by doing so, became increasingly loved and/or hated. Southerners of all stripes could not help but feel a certain protective ownership of their homegrown bard. He was, after all, one of them. Writing from the point of view of a culture that was a little different, and a little slower, and a lot more eccentric than that of other parts of the country. Lewis often drew criticism for his disparaging remarks about gays and feminists and his dislike for the New South. His reflections on the Old South were often misinterpreted. Nevertheless, his popularity stemmed from his humor, humanity, patriotism and old-fashioned values that permeated his writing.

Take, for example, how he described the difference in the definitions of the words "naked" and "nekkid". "Naked," he would say, "means you have no

clothes on. Nekkid means you have no clothes on and are up to something". His frequent bewilderment by the modern age struck a chord with many baby-boomer readers. He railed against "the speech police" and the stereotyping of the South in films and literature. And then, just when you thought you had him pegged as an angry man, Lewis would up and surprise you. He'd write, "I've been noticing flowers lately, which is something I've never done before." Or he'd speak of the funeral of a friend's father with such quiet dignity and respect and heart-rending loss that you wanted to comfort him.

Lewis was like that. He quickly became like family, like a funny uncle or brother. In 1988, Lewis made his acting debut on the sitcom *Designing Women*, in the episode "Oh, Brother". Lewis played the role of Clayton Sugarbaker, the half-brother of Julia and Suzanne Sugarbaker. Clayton was a former mental patient aspiring to be a standup comedian. Lewis would later say that it wasn't much of a stretch for him as an actor.

Lewis had a somewhat troubled life, battling alcoholism and going through 3 divorces. He was voted "the author from hell" at a publishing convention for his behavior on book tours. He also suffered from a congenital heart defect – a valve problem. In his own words, "There are three little leaflets that control the flow of blood to the heart. I was born with only two

of those leaflets. It was just after the war, so there may have been a shortage. Either that or my daddy didn't get a good toe hold." His faulty valve would lead to 4 open-heart surgeries and a series of near death moments. The worst was the last operation in 1993, from which he never fully recovered. The whole story is contained in one of his finest works, *I Took a Lickin' and Kept on Tickin' (And Now I Believe in Miracles)*. The title was no exaggeration. He had been just shy of being pronounced dead and was even on a heart donor list for a time. Lewis lived a little less than a year after his last heart surgery.

In his columns Lewis would regale us with high points and low points in his life. A low point included the death of his beloved black Labrador Retriever, Catfish, and the famous column about it that broke readers' hearts, along with his own. The column was entitled, "Memories of Catfish Keep on Doggin'".

It's been two months since my dog, Catfish, the black Lab, up and died on me.

He would have been 12 this month. I really thought I would be over it all by now. I get over divorces and surgeries in about six months. I figured I could get over the death of a dog in two.

But he lingers.

I've been asked a thousand times, "Are you going to get a new dog?"

I thought about it, and I've had a lot of offers. For all I hear about the failings of the human race, there are so many still out there that are willing to step forward in another's time of need. Even strangers.

I've had offers of bulldogs, beagle hounds, even a poodle, perish the

thought, and, of course, other black Labs. I heard from a woman with a new litter of black Labs that had a paper trail on them dating back a century.

I'm sorry. I just didn't want a dog with a more impressive pedigree than my own.

And I worry about bringing up another dog during a puppy stage. I have a friend who was telling me, "My wife and I got a puppy once who chewed up our driveway."

I didn't believe that.

"I'm not lying," said my friend. "The dog chewed up the driveway. He found one loose piece of asphalt and started there. He pulled out that piece and chewed on it and then another piece and then another, until he had chewed-up asphalt chunks all over the yard and our driveway was dirt."

Catfish, when he was a puppy, destroyed television remote-control devices and my eyeglasses.

I miss his companionship. I had my place on the green couch in front of the television. His place was next to me. He would sprawl there and sleep like some kingly beast upon his padded divan as long as I would remain next to him. And that was his place. Anyone who dared take it while he was temporarily away would be met with a wretched stare and bark once Catfish wanted it back.

And they would move. I doubt he actually would have bitten them if they hadn't, but they didn't know that, and, come to think of it, I'm not absolutely certain he wouldn't have, either.

Evidence of him remains around the house. I found a chewed up golf ball on the floor the other day. That was his doing.

Catfish grew out of the destructive stage at 3, but he would still maim something like an occasional golf ball if he happened to find it on the floor.

His bag of food is still in the cupboard. I've just never gotten around to throwing it out.

There's still a framed photograph of me holding him when he was a puppy in the den hallway. When he was alive I rarely noticed it. Now, it seems to catch my eye each time I walk past it.

I miss him at night. I've got one of those elaborate alarm systems, but I felt even safer knowing that nothing would approach my house without meeting with Catfish's bark, which was astoundingly deep and loud.

And I miss that bark when I come home. It never mattered what time I came home or where I had been. As soon as he would hear the car door slam in the driveway, he would start and he would keep it up until I opened the

door. And then, there he would stand, tail wag, to greet me. My self-esteem always soared.

I walk into an empty, silent house these days. I feel the difference in the deepest recesses of wherever it is my love resides.

Two months. No whining and pawing on the door to go outside. No thrilled bellow at the words, "Catfish, wanna go for a ride!" No smell. Dogs smell. It was a good smell.

Two months. Sixty days. It should have ended by now.

I said, it should have.

Lewis also liked to recount stories of his childhood, as well as those related to him by his friends. One such column is entitled, "I'll Never Forget The Time..."

We all go back a long way, and quite naturally, we begin telling war stories, the ones that inevitably begin with, "I'll never forget the time..."

We don't see each other that often anymore, and we haven't seen each other's parents in years, and there is the Southern custom of asking about one's parents.

It goes, "How's your mama an' 'em?" – which translates into, "In what condition is your mother and your other first of kin?"

We took turns talking about our parents. "My mother puts terrible guilt trips on me," somebody said. "I'll call her and tell her I'm on my way shopping and she'll say, 'I wish I had the money to go out shopping.'"

"Mine does the same thing," said somebody else. "I won a trip to Las Vegas from my new company and I called my mother and told her about it."

"She said, 'I guess that means you won't be coming to see me in a long time.' I said, 'Mama, it's just for a week.' She said, 'I may not be here in another week.' She's in perfect health, but I called her every day from Vegas just to make sure she hadn't contracted some sort of terrible disease."

I said my mother still worries about whether or not I'm wearing clean underwear because I might be in a wreck and the doctors would see my dirty undershorts.

"My mother does that, too," somebody spoke up. "But it all means they really love us."

It does. It's funny how our attitudes change about our parents as we get older and they get older. These people were our enemies when we were children.

They were the ones who made us eat our vegetables, made us go to bed earlier than we wanted to, fussed over our grades, lectured us and wouldn't allow us out of the house with dirty underwear.

But you forget all that, and you would miss the guilt trips if your folks weren't around to send you on them.

"Tell them about your dad and the biscuits," one friend asked another.

"God, it still makes me cry," she began.

"Every morning when I go to work, I go right by my father's house. And every morning – I've been doing this for years – I stop by and drink coffee with him and he makes biscuits for me because he doesn't want me going to work on an empty stomach.

"One day, I overslept and I knew I wouldn't be able to stop by and see him. The weather was awful. It was cold and it was raining.

"So I called my dad and told him I wouldn't have time to stop by. He said, "You won't?" I could hear the disappointment in his voice, but I said, "Daddy, I'll stop by tomorrow morning, so don't worry about it."

"So I get in the car and I start driving to work. As soon as I rounded the corner to drive past the house, I saw this figure standing out in the cold and rain with a sack in his hand.

"It was Daddy. He was out there waiting for me so I would still have my biscuits."

Everybody in the room was in tears when she finished. 'Tis the season to be thankful. Thanks for parental love, the purest love of all.

Lewis was truly an unabashed southerner. He never apologized for our failings, but lord, he would make fun of them. Moreover, he would scold "Yankees" who made fun of anything Southern, or worse, tried to emulate us. As he often reminded Northerners, "Delta is ready when you are." He also wrote a column about the word, "Y'all".

Y'all is, to be sure, a southern thing that most people living outside the South don't understand. I have long been involved in y'allism. I find it a

charming word that is pure Southern, but because it is misunderstood, I thought it would be wise to discuss y'all at some length. The biggest mistake people from outside the South make in the y'all area is they don't think we say y'all at all. They think we say "you all."

A Southerner visiting the North surely will be mocked the first time he or she opens his or her mouth and out comes a Southern accent. Northerners will giggle ask, "So where are you all from?" I answer by saying, "I all is from Atlanta." For some unknown reason, Northerners think Southerners use you all in the singular sense. How many movies have I seen where a Northerner is trying to do a Southern accent, failing miserably, saying you all while addressing one other person? Southerners rarely use "you all" in any situation. But they never, never, ever, ever use it when addressing just one person. If you were in my home and I offered you a cup of coffee, I would say, "Would you like a cup of coffee?" If you and your brother-in-law and your cousin were in my home, then I'd say, "Would y'all like a cup of coffee?" Y'all is, of course, a contraction of you all, and most southerners use it in all verbal situations involving more than one person.

And one other thing: northerners also tend to think southerners say the following when bidding a farewell to a visitor, "You all come back now, ya heah?" Maybe the Clampetts said that, but very few real southerners do. We might say, "Y'all come back to see us when you can," or "If y'all can't come, call." But this "you heah" business is the concoction of some Yankee scriptwriter trying to be cute. I take the southern accent and the preservation of its purity quite seriously.

In re-reading many of Lewis's columns in preparation for this paper, I was struck by how many of his columns had a timeless quality. Lewis wrote a column in the late 80's entitled, "What's Going on With Senior Proms?"

An Atlanta father, whose daughter is graduating from high school this year, called and asked, "Do you know what's going on with senior proms?"

I confessed I didn't. The last time I thought about a senior prom was 21 years ago.

"A lot of things have changed since you and I were that age," the father said.

I asked for specifics.

"First, you wouldn't believe how much some of the girls are paying for dresses to wear to their proms."

"My daughter and her classmates are spending \$300 and \$400.

"Most of the boys rent their formals, but they still have to buy their dates flowers, and many parents fork over the money for their sons to rent limousines."

Kids today are taking limos to their senior proms?

"It's because all this concern about drunk driving. Parents had rather rent their kids a limo and not have to worry about them being in a wreck or getting thrown in jail for DUI."

I said that sounded like sound thinking to me, but why didn't they simply drive their kids to the prom and then pick them up with it's over, thus solving the drunk driving thing and saving the money they would have to spend on a limo?

"I asked my own daughter the same thing, and she said any kid whose parents drove them to the prom would be the laughing stock of the school."

It's been a long time and I suppose I have forgotten how tough peer pressure can be on a teenager.

"You haven't heard it all," the father said. "I know one group of parents who chartered a bus for their kids and put a bar and bartender on the bus so the kids could ride from party to party without having to worry about getting stopped by the cops.

"A lot of proms are at downtown hotels. Some parents are even renting hotel rooms for their kids, so they won't be out driving drunk.

"The hotels make their parents come down and pay in advance and give permission for their children to stay in the rooms.

"I'm sure the parents know that their kids wind up sleeping with their dates, but again, they said it's better to have them in bed with their dates than in a car with them."

I asked the man, who refused to single out the names of high schools where these practices are taking place, if he allowed his daughter to take part in any of this.

"No," he said, "and she says she'll never speak to me again."

What appears to be happening here is today's high school students are no dummies and they are holding the DUI hysteria over their parents' heads in order to get to do a lot of fun things like riding in limos and shacking up with their dates.

I'm not a parent so don't look for any answers from me, but I do know what my own mother would have said to me if I had said to her, "Mom, I need money for a limo to the senior prom and for a hotel room or else I might get drunk and drive."

She would have said, "Have your butt home at a decent hour and if I find out you've been drinking, I'll wear you out."

Parents apparently were better at explaining things back then than they are today.

Lewis could also write powerful, evocative and deceptively simple columns like, "Be Sweet" based on his late mother's habitual last words in every conversation. In it he wrote,

My mother's words were so simple. Be sweet. But we aren't sweet. We don't honor sweet. We don't even like sweet. Sweet is weak. Respect me or I'll shoot you. Sweet is weak. No. No. Be sweet. Be kind and gentle. Be tolerant. Be forgiving and slow to anger. Be tender and able to cry. Be kind to old people and dogs. Be loving. Share. Don't pout. Don't be so loud. Hold a puppy. Kiss a hand. Put your arms around a frightened child. Make an outstanding play and then don't do the King Tut butt strut to point out the inadequacies of the vanquished. Be sweet. The wonders that might do. The wonders that just might do. I can still hear you, Mama.

Two months later after writing that column, on March 20, 1994, at 10:45 a.m., Lewis Grizzard went to join his mother. The doctors said he died peacefully and that there had been brain damage. He would have never been

the same. Lewis Grizzard was 47 years old. They sang, "Precious Memories" at his funeral. Fans still drive to Moreland, Georgia looking for him. They leave notes or flags or little toy bulldogs by his gravestone, which reads, "A Great American." If you go, don't look for a headstone with the name "Grizzard". You have to look for the name "Word." That was his mother's maiden name, and the other half of his ashes that weren't scattered over the 50-yard line at Sanford Stadium are buried there next to her. Lewis might have laughed at the reverence that suddenly descended upon him after his death. He was, after all, irreverent, sentimental, arrogant, kind, outspoken, gifted, driven, troubled, and brilliant. He was a bundle of contradictions and a very funny man. Lewis was the author of 25 books. The titles of some of which are:

Kathy Sue Loudermilk, I Love You: A Good Beer Joint is Hard to Find and Other Facts of Life

Don't Sit Under the Grits Tree with Anyone Else but Me

They Tore Out My Heart and Stomped That Sucker Flat

If Love Were Oil, I'd Be About a Quart Low

Elvis is Dead and I Don't Feel So Good Myself

Shoot Low, Boys, They're Riding Shetland Ponies

My Daddy Was a Pistol, and I'm a Son of a Gun

When My Loves Returns From the Ladies Room, Will I Be Too Old to Care?

Don't Bend Over in the Garden, Granny, You Know Them Taters Got Eyes

Personally, I think Lewis may have been a frustrated country music songwriter. He certainly had a flair for titles anyway. Lewis Grizzard, I still miss you.