

What do you think of when you hear, The Sunshine State?

Some people automatically think California, but some people are morons. I should know. After all, I am from Florida. The sunshine state. A land where winter means that it might frost, but never freeze. Where pecanet grow on trees and alligators are occasionally domesticated. The promised land, where elderly republicans from across the nation flock to warm their brittle bones and sway the electoral college.

I imagine that growing up in Florida was probably similar to growing up anywhere else, but maybe not. People sure look at you differently when you tell them that's where you're from.

"Oh, you're from Florida," they say with a mocking smile. Well, our state bird is the mockingbird, so be careful when mincing words with us.

"You look like you're from Deez," I would reply.

"What's that? What's Deez?" they would say, confused.

"Deez nuts!" I would yell excitedly. Case closed. Got em'.

No matter where you grew up in the United States, there are some experiences, some life lessons, that are just ubiquitous. If you were born in the eighties like me, you probably gave or received a handjob in the back of a dollar movie theater. It's possible you've taken a Greyhound trip with a jewelry box filled with assorted drugs. You may have gotten a tattoo from a friend in a living room. Maybe you've been to a rave. Around Christmas time, I'll bet you and your friends split into two cars and drove around the city to see who could steal more baby Jesus statues from nativity scenes.

But have you ever tied a rope around a port-o-potty at a construction site at 3 a.m. and hauled it down a residential street in a jeep with no doors at 50 miles per hour while it slides left and right, smashing indiscriminately into cars and mailboxes, splashing shit, piss, and blue chemical waste water in its wake?

Have you ever run half naked down a sewage runoff canal and hid out in a Steak N' Shake bathroom after somebody called the cops because they saw you getting a blowjob in what they considered their backyard?

You ever drive up to a mail drop-off box and reach in real deep to pull out a handful of mystery mail?

Have you ever traded acid for opiates, opiates for ecstasy, or bought random drugs off a local street dude in a wheelchair just because they were cheap?

You might be from Florida.

I was born in Tampa, Florida. Eleven pounds, three ounces, at 2:33 a.m., after fourteen hours of labor. I surprised everyone, not by my size, or my stubbornness in not wanting to leave the womb. Not even by the fact that, upon inspection, there was a hole in my heart which managed to seal itself without surgery. No, what surprised my parents was that even though they had a freshly painted pink nursery for me and lots of warm pink baby clothes, and they had deliberated endlessly picking out the name, Sue Ellen, despite all that, I was born a boy. I was a boy named Sue. I don't think my parents were Johnny Cash fans though because at the last minute they just decided to name me after my dad.

I smoked my first cigarette with one of my brothers when I was five. We found it in the gutter and lit it with a magnifying glass that we had been using to fry ants under the summer sun. We coughed and it tasted gross, but we smoked every butt we found from then on.

In the summertime, we would try and come up with ways to make a little money so that we could blow it on candy and slurpees at the 7-11. We pushed the lawnmower around the neighborhood trying to convince people that we were landscapers. We offered to detail and wash cars. When the citrus came

into season, we would pick lemons and grapefruits and oranges from all over the neighborhood to make juice that we would sell at a little roadside stand.

The orange is the state fruit. When they were extra ripe they dropped from the tree and we would wait for them to rot, just a little. Then we would see who could throw them further. The game was to wait and listen for it to hit something blocks away. Extra points were awarded if you heard someone yell or glass break. Grapefruits did even more damage.

My friend Shane and I had another game, which I believe would be considered criminal mischief in a court of law today. We used to hide in this big live oak tree in his front yard with our pump action bb guns. We thought it was hilarious to shoot at cars when they drove by. One time I aimed a little high and shattered a guy's driver side window. He slammed on his brakes and got out. Super pissed, face beet red, he screamed, "I see you fuckers! Get out here now or I'm calling the police!" We just stayed quiet up in that tree, trying not to laugh. Eventually he drove away. Sometimes we would just run around Shane's backyard shooting at each other. That's why I had a ball bearing lodged in my arm until I was sixteen.

We stole a bunch of pills from his mom once, along with her car keys. The plan was to go joyriding, but Shane put the car in drive instead of reverse and we crashed through his brick living room wall.

I guess you could say he was my best friend growing up, but it was a matter of convenience because he lived only a few blocks away. I had another friend, Stevie, who lived even closer but my mom told me I couldn't hang out with him anymore after I described to her what he'd shown me in the back of his dad's closet. I thought it was a halloween costume but she explained to me as best she could what a Ku Klux Klan robe was.

I didn't miss Stevie though, because Shane had a pool. Shane had the internet in 1995! His family didn't associate with any known hate groups and for the most part his mom didn't give a fuck what we did. All that, and I still wanted to beat the shit out him most of the time. He was a narcissistic only child and his mother spoiled him rotten. He always wanted me to come watch him at his karate class even though I couldn't afford to join. We were arguing one time and he tried to pull some of his blue belt moves on me, so I choked him out in his living room while his mom stood there screaming and crying. We weren't allowed to hang out for a while after that but we still had to carpool to school together.

I didn't need karate class. I had two older brothers and went to public school. I got picked on a lot and I fought a lot. My knuckles were hardened steel.

Waiting for my mom to pick me up from school in the afternoon always felt like a lawless time. There weren't many adults around and the ones that were there didn't have the energy left to keep mean kids in check after they had slogged through another day.

Nick Lofton was a fifth grader. On good days he was nice to me, on bad days he bullied me. This day was a bad day. I was sketching a superhero, minding my own business. Nick came over and snatched the drawing from me

"This is stupid as fuck," he told me.

I knew that. I wasn't blind. I didn't think I was any great artist. I was just passing time until my mom showed up.

"So how would you make it better?" I asked him, hoping to engage him, maybe draw some sympathy. The corners of his mouth turned up into a doofy, wicked smile.

"I'm just going to put it where it belongs." He crumpled up the drawing and threw it in the trash.

I wanted to ignore him. I wanted to bury my head in a library book so deep, he would've thought I'd moved away, but I was worried he would throw that in the trash too. He was relentless.

“So where’s your fat mom at?” he teased.

That flipped the switch. My eyebrow went up. My jaw clenched involuntarily.

“Say that again,” I said through my teeth.

“Say what?” he replied, mocking me.

I turned and spit in his face.

“Say what you said again!” I demanded, standing up.

“You motherfucker! I’m gonna kill you!” he screamed, wiping my loogie out his eye.

I never gave him the chance. I split his lip, tackled him off the bench, and kept swinging until some adult pulled me off. I don’t know what happened to Nick Lofton after that. He wasn’t dead or anything, but he never came back to that school.

I got a week of suspension.

My mother was furious.

“A week of fucking suspension! God damn it! What the hell happened this time?”

“He called you fat,” I mumbled.

“Speak up!”

“I said, he called you fat, so I hit him!”

She didn’t say anything. I looked in the rearview mirror and caught a little smirk spreading across her face. When she saw me looking, it quickly disappeared, but she never told my dad that I’d gotten suspended again. We kept it our secret. My mom always said that I should try to solve a problem with words before throwing fists, but agreed that sometimes it just had to be done.

I couldn’t quite hear what words my mom had tried to use with Lynn, the next door neighbor, but I knew it didn’t work when she hollered, “get over here you little redneck bitch so I can beat your ass!”

At that point I ran to the window in my parents bedroom to see what was going on. My mother was straddling the woman like a UFC fighter, beating her silly. Lynn’s boyfriend, Buddy, ran out to break up the fight. That was all the excuse my dad needed to jump over the fence and knock him flat on his ass.

After the police had come and gone, the story came out. My mom was gardening in the front yard. Lynn was drunk, talking shit, and when my mother ignored her, until Lynn threw her half empty beer can, hitting my mom in the head. Later, I remember my dad foolishly asking why she hadn’t just ignored it.

“I don’t know goddamnit! I guess I’m just Port Tampa white trash,” my mother fired back.

For clarity, it’s not like we lived in a trailer park or anything. The trailer park was a full two blocks away. We had houses with backyards where we would play games like Mud Wars or Firestick. Firestick is just ‘Capture The Flag’, but the flag is a log dipped in napalm, which is easier to make than most people realize.

Now there’s no denying that those neighbors were scumbags, but they paled in comparison to the dude who rented the house before them. He would put dead possums in our trash as a joke. One time he got drunk and shot his dog with a bow and arrow. Actually, you may have heard of him, Hank Earl Carr was his name. He’s the reason it’s illegal to possess a concealed handcuff key in Florida. He was arrested after shooting his girlfriend’s four year old son in the head. Cuffed with his hands in front of him, he was able to free himself with the key, which he wore on a chain around his neck. He then snatched a pistol and killed the two police who had him in custody, followed by a state trooper who attempted to apprehend him as he fled. Eventually he held up in a convenience store where he took the clerk hostage. The standoff lasted nearly four hours, when Carr finally decided to release the hostage and shoot himself in the head.

It's no wonder my mom only let me ride my bike a few blocks away. The world is dangerous and so she gave a lot of fucks about what my brother's and I got into, especially after the time I got amnesia. My mother always wanted a baby girl but ended up with four boys instead. The fact that she raised us, battled ovarian cancer for fifteen years, and still lived long enough to see the day where my father was stone cold sober is a testament to her grit.

It's probably because of how tough she is that I can still remember the first time I saw her cry. We were at the beach when a heavy storm rolled in. Everyone seemed to be packing up. My mother made us hustle to try and beat the rush to the bridge. Unfortunately, we didn't realize that there was already an evacuation warning and traffic was jammed up, bumper to bumper.

Now, the Skyway Bridge is a suspension bridge and it tends to sway in heavy winds. So picture you're in a storm that is dark as night. It's pouring rain. Lightning bolts and thunder flash and crack every couple of minutes. You're stuck behind an endless line of cars in the middle of a bridge that is slowly swaying back and forth, and one of your kids in the backseat pipes up, saying, "hey mom, is that a tornado?"

I was the kid in the back and I saw my mom lose it as we watched not one, not two, but three water spouts form out of thin air and spin around each other in the bay.

We lived, but that was the scariest thing that ever happened on the way home from a beach day, so it's only fair that I tell you about the funniest thing that ever happened on the way home from the beach.

It was an incredibly normal afternoon, nothing out of the ordinary. We swam, we dug for coquinas, we threw sand dollars at each other, I probably built a shitty sandcastle, and my dad drank a million beers. When we got ready to go, we headed for the outdoor showers to try and get the sand out of our asscracks. If you didn't do a good job you'd have a terrible rash by the time you got home. We changed into dry clothes, loaded the car, grabbed the two liter of soda out of the cooler, and hit the road.

My mom had barely made it onto the bridge, no more than six minutes from the beach, when my youngest brother started whining that he had to pee.

"That's too bad," my mom said flatly. "We were just at the restroom, now we're on the bridge. You're just gonna have to hold it."

"I can't hold it," he cried.

"Then you're going to have to piss in a bottle."

We all thought she was kidding.

"Here," she rolled down the window and dumped out the rest of the two liter before passing it back to him.

Reluctantly my little brother took it and the rest of us were resigned to look out the window. I glanced over to make sure he wasn't peeing all over the car. It seemed to be going smoother than expected but then someone cut my mom off in traffic. She swerved and suddenly I was watching my little brother piss full-on in my oldest brother's face. I may never laugh that hard at anything, ever again.

Growing up with six people in a three bedroom house, it was nearly impossible to have any time alone. We lived in the last house on a dead end street. There was a chain link fence at the end of the block and a grassy sort of alleyway past it that ran perpendicular to the road. On the far side of the alley was another fence, and past that fence, the lake.

Nobody swam in the lake. Shit, we weren't even supposed to play down by the lake. The story was that two sister's had gotten pulled underwater by alligators and drowned. When they dragged the lake, sure enough they found two healthy ten foot gators and the bloated corpses of the girls. Of course,

that may have been one of the many lies that my mother told me growing up. Like the one about if you don't wear your seatbelt and the car door opens while you're driving, it creates a vacuum and can suck you out. It's so much easier to scare kids than to just be honest, especially when you're raising four boys and trying to hold down a job at the same time.

Regardless, we were bound to do stupid and dangerous things. Being scared of something was usually just a catalyst to confront it. I would build forts in the woods around the lake. Older kids would get drunk back there and tear them down from time to time but I would just fix them up. It was my fortress of solitude. If my dad was drunk or my brother's were teasing me or if I just wanted some god damn peace and quiet I would go down to the lake.

My favorite time was at night. I would watch the moonlight reflect off the water and it did existential things to my eleven year old brain. It was always quiet. Probably because people in Tampa aren't accustomed to nature so they steer clear of it, especially at night.

When I was sixteen they started renovating the park. They cleared a bunch of the woods and started to build a fishing dock. I was furious. In my head, this new community vision was going to turn the lake, my lake, into a main attraction in South Tampa. My secret spot was going to be overrun. I made a plan. I would let them build the dock and just before the grand opening of the park, I was going to burn it down.

I had sex down by the lake that year. It was Thanksgiving and my girlfriend had come over. We ate quickly and kept trying to sneak away to do over-the-pants hand stuff in my room, but my mother was no fool. After cooking all day, it was incredible that she was still vigilant enough to stop me from finger blasting my girlfriend with the door slightly ajar. We gave up and decided to go for a walk down to the lake. We found a nice sunny spot in the grass. Looking back, the only more obvious spot for us to fuck would have been out in the parking lot itself. So when my dad pulled up with my little brother in the back of the minivan, he had no trouble spotting us right away. Ah, memory lane.

It took a whole year for them to build out the little fishing pier. Appropriately, the grand opening was set for the Fourth of July. I was already prepared. I dressed all in black. Ski mask, long sleeve shirt, gloves, track pants, and a double layer of black socks over my shoes. I figured the socks would at least obscure the prints off the bottom of my size fifteen sneakers. I had a gallon of gasoline and a box of strike anywhere matches in a black backpack. It was just after midnight. I snuck out of the house and crept down the alleyway, trying to stay in the shadows. I remember the moon was almost full. It was so bright it threatened to give me away, but there was no one out.

I got to the dock and doused it in gasoline, starting at the far end and working my way back, but the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry. Gas had splashed in the backpack, soaking the box of matches. I tried lighting three matches at a time but the heads would just crumble. I nixed the plan, telling myself that I would try again the next night, but in the back of my mind, I knew I wouldn't.

In the end it didn't really matter because what I hadn't realized then was that South Tampa was a filthy shithole. You would have had to pay people to get them to flock to some rickety fishing pier on the southside of town. It wasn't even on the beach.

Now, I've got a million or more Fourth of July stories but there's one more tale I have to get in. Did you think I was going to mention having amnesia just to tease you? It's like you don't know me at all.

I was young, maybe six or seven. My oldest brother was taking his go-kart out to race up and down our dead end street with my second oldest brother and another neighborhood kid.

I sat at the edge of the yard and watched them go back and forth, knowing that he would never give me a turn. Even if I had been old enough, even if I had known the first thing about driving or operating a small engine vehicle, which I didn't, I was a constant source of irritation to my older brother. Withholding the use of his coveted toy gave him a quiet joy. Of course I still had to ask, because nothing happens in this life without intent. Predictably, my brother said no.

My father stumbled out of the house to smoke a cigarette, his trademark beer in hand. He asked if I had gotten to ride the go-kart and was visibly upset when I told him that David wouldn't let me. My father had raised my two older brothers, but I was his first natural born son. He took it as a personal slight that I hadn't been allowed to join in.

He smiled a shit-eating grin and flicked his cigarette butt as he sauntered out into the street, holding up his hand and motioning for my brother to stop. My brother slowed down and stopped next to my dad, but didn't remove his helmet or shut off the engine, so my dad reached down and flipped the kill switch.

I stayed where I was, pretending I didn't know what was happening as they started to argue. Eventually my brother got off the kart and took off his helmet, handing it roughly to my dad. I couldn't really believe it was happening and I remembered thinking that this might never happen again, so I'd better make the best of it.

My dad motioned me over and had me sit in the go-kart, showing me the relatively simple controls. Gas, brake, steering wheel, and kill switch. He instructed me to only gently press the gas pedal and to always keep my left foot over the brake. When he was satisfied that I had grasped the fundamentals, he went to the back of the kart, pulled the starter cord, and the engine came to life.

My brother stood off to the side with his arms crossed, whispering to the neighbor boy, presumably something about how he was going to beat my ass later, but I just smiled.

My dad came back to my side. With one hand on the steering wheel and one on the back of the seat, he leaned in to give me last minute instructions, which I couldn't hear a word of through the helmet.

I gave him the thumbs up to signal that I understood, but he still held on to the steering wheel and seat as though it was my first time riding a bike without training wheels. I tried to read his lips and he seemed to be telling me to give it a little gas.

There were at least three things wrong with this scenario, all of which I disregarded because they were overridden by my excitement in the moment.

Number one, my dad was drunk. No big deal, he was usually drunk.

Number two, the gas pedal was sticky, so pressing it gently wasn't an option.

Number three, a gas powered go-kart is not a bicycle with, or without, training wheels and so there is no reason to hold onto it when showing someone how to use it. If something goes wrong, there is little to nothing you will be able to do. That's the helmet's job.

I punched the gas and my dad ran alongside for a moment, attempting to help me steer, but succeeding only in jerking the wheel, tripping, and smacking his head hard on the asphalt. I drove over him and he broke a few fingers somewhere in the chaos.

He ended up going to the hospital and spent most of the night in the emergency room. He got his fingers fixed up, got his cuts and scrapes cleaned, and had his head examined. They determined that he was basically fine, gave him a prescription for some heavy painkillers, and sent him home.

I bet you didn't see that coming. You thought I was going to get hurt by the go-kart, didn't you?

Anyway, the next day a family friend brought a care package by. They had heard about the incident and misunderstood, thinking that I had been the one who got injured. Remember, my dad and I

share the same name. The care package included an assortment of candy, a card, and a balloon. It was a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles balloon that said, 'Get Well Soon Dude!'.

I loved the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles at the time and my dad couldn't have given a shit. He was laying in the living room, zonked out on cheap beer and painkillers. I asked him repeatedly if I could have his balloon but he wouldn't respond. His eyes would flutter open a bit and close again. I continued to pester him until my mother stormed into the room and put a menacing finger in my face.

"Your dad feels like shit," she said. "Take that fucking balloon, get your shoes, and go outside."

Say no more, say no more, I thought. I grabbed my shoes, I grabbed my balloon, and I headed out the door.

Now when I sat on the front stoop to put my shoes on, I thoughtlessly let go of the balloon. As objects filled with helium are wont to do, it floated away. I threw on my shoes to chase it down, but as a flat-footed, overweight child my vertical lift was almost non-existent. I saw my bicycle lying in the front yard and a lightbulb went on over my head, a very dim lightbulb.

I had seen my brother's, on several occasions, perform a feat that I thought was remarkable and heroic, magical almost. They would ride their bikes as fast as they could and carefully stand up on the seat, balancing there until the bike began to lose momentum.

I wasn't convinced that I could balance, but I thought that if I could at least get my foot up on the seat, I could use it as a springboard to jump off and grab the balloon. I only had one chance and I had to act fast.

Surprisingly, I managed to get a foot up on the seat and even got a decent jump in. I was so close that I really thought I might have it, but I whiffed. I whiffed so fucking hard. My focus was so attuned to the task at hand that I gave no real consideration to how I would land, and like my father the previous day, I came down on my head, hitting the asphalt with tremendous force. I blacked out and when I came to, I was in the emergency room.

I didn't know what had happened. I didn't know who I was. I didn't know who anyone was. The doctor told the woman, purported to be my mother, that the impact had caused amnesia. As she cried, she asked him how long it was likely to take for my memory to return and he informed her that there was no way to tell. It could be a few days, a few weeks, or it could be forever.

He recommended that I be excused from school temporarily, as that environment was likely to be too confusing to be beneficial. He told her that I should do things I might normally do. Eat my favorite foods, watch my favorite t.v. shows, et cetera.

Exasperated, my mother brought me home where I had an extensive book collection. I was a 'voracious reader' she told me, but when I opened up a page, I may as well have been looking at sanskrit.

I sat around the house not really speaking with any of these strange people who were supposedly my family. I watched Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles VHS tapes on repeat and ate pizza for two weeks. Then, like snapping your fingers, my memory was back.

If I had been more introspective at that very moment, I may have been able to focus a lens on the cache of experiences from my childhood that had just returned to me. It's possible that I would have seen, right then and there, the trajectory I was on and been able to steer myself off that course, but I didn't learn until much later in life that it was going to be a marathon trying to outrun growing up Florida Man, and I'd have to sprint the whole way.

Thankfully I had that extra time though because without it I would never have learned that you certainly can light farts on fire, sixteen dumpstered glazed doughnuts is my limit, and poop floats, at least in other people's pools.