

Portion from
Mama's Cancer Stick Follies:
If You're Looking for "Sympathy"
Search the Dictionary Between Shit and Syphilis
by Jim Lopez

"A nigger's work is never done," my mother, Nancy Kathleen Gilbride, use to say, as she yanked off her JC Penny's suit, which she bought at a rack sale, switching costumes, and slipped on a waitress' uniform at around 6:00 PM, working a second evening job. When she was pissed off or in one of her multiple personalities she would call me "a nigger baby." Why she referred to herself as a "nigger" and to her son as "a nigger baby" left me thoroughly rattled. I never knew her for a racist. She had slept with many black men. When my sister was born the first thing my mother asked the doctor was, "Is it black?" instead of the common and what seems to be the more natural question, "Is it a boy or a girl?" My father was an olive skinned Cuban. My mother was an adulterous, red headed, Irish-Pollock, who lacked discretion and propriety when it came to speaking her mind. Whether it was a lack of mind or a refined mind was a puzzle that teased her sanity.

When my sister and I were well on our own, Nancy contracted cancer. She was forty-five-years-old. She beat breast cancer, ovarian cancer, lung cancer and cancer in her lymph nodes. None of them killed her. Her steely, comedic and simply crazed bitch personality was her strength. It was at this time that my sister, Dee, left California and moved to the town of Coalgate, Oklahoma, to be near our mother and care for her.

Nancy returned home from the men's barber shop, where she received a free head shaving. She was in a hurry as life's impending doomed crept upon her. She went into

the barn, fumbling and tripping in the dark, found a shovel and walked over to the side of the chicken coup. She dug a disordered ditch that was roughly two feet wide, six feet in length and two feet deep. When she tired she went back into the house and plopped herself in front of her big screen TV, watched daytime television, delicately ate a quarter pound of fudge and smoked Capri cigarettes.

A couple-‘a-weeks past when she remembered to phone her daughter and tell her about her ditch. Dee picked up the receiver, “Ask Rick to come over and help me move the refrigerator: the one in the garage.”

“For what!?” Dee asked. Her husband, Rick, had been out on the road for two days, having driven a load from Kentucky to Atoka, Oklahoma. He was resting for his next haul.

“I don’t want it anymore. I want it taken to the pond, so I can burn it.”

“Does it still work? If it still works give it to uncle Cedric. He can sell it for fifty bucks.”

“I don’t care! I want it out of here! Ask Rick to come over and help me drag it to the pond!”

“No! Call uncle Cedric! He’ll take it and sell it for fifty bucks!”

Nancy hung up. Dee went back to dispatching truckers around the Midwest. The phone rang five minutes later. Dee picked up, “Ask Rick if he’ll come over and help me drag the refrigerator over to the pond so I can burn it.”

“I thought I told you to call uncle Cedric. He can get fifty bucks for it!”

“I don’t care! I want it out of here!”

“You’re going to catch the hay field on fire again!”

“I don’t care I have a bunch of things that need burnin’. I can burn the refrigerator with everything else!” she shouted and then hung up.

Dee decided she best be goin’ over to her mother’s house.

Last time Nancy burned her garbage she caught three acres on fire and was found wearing a ragged dress covered with a parka, gray sweat pants tucked into mismatched socks at the ankles, slippers and a furry black hat. When the fire department showed up blasting their sirens, she waved them off with her garden hose, shouting “It’s ok!” Her six dogs were lapping the fence line barking like mad. “Turn off your damn siren, you’ll wake up Hank! Dukie...Sandy...Shut up!” she screamed, turning the garden hose on her dogs. The firemen busily pushed past her, hooking up their hoses to the well. Nancy ran into the house and called her daughter.

Dee was in no mood for phone play, noticing the caller ID, so she drove over to her mother’s instead. Nancy met her at the fence followed by her six barking dogs, “Shut up! Get in the house!” she commanded. The dogs ignored her.

“Your mother can’t be lighting fires so close to the hay field. She’s fixin’ to burn her own house down,” a fireman told Dee as he drove away.

(The Coalgate Newspaper reported the incident.)

Dee got out of the car, yelling, “Where’s the refrigerator!? Call uncle Cedric! He’ll take it and sell it!”

Nancy ignored her, “Come here,” she said insistently, walking towards the chicken coup. Dee followed her as she reasoned with her mother to give the refrigerator

to uncle Cedric. Crossing through the back yard she caught a glimpse of broken chairs, boxes of junk and the refrigerator on the other side of the pond. Nancy had impatiently dragged it on out on her own. Dee found herself standing in front of the ditch. “Look,” Nancy commanded.

“Look at what!?”

“Look what I did!” Nancy explained, standing proudly over her ditch.

“Look at what!? What the fuck am I supposed to be looking at!?” Dee shouted, exhausted, waiting for another crazy tale.

“My mass grave, I spent two hours digging it, so I can put down my animals just before the cancer kills me.”

Dee walked away as if she hadn't heard a thing. Nancy urgently ran past her, shoving and shouting, “Get out of my way, I haven't shit in a week!” DeeAnna went into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, pulled out a coke, sat down and lit a cigarette. (She too smoked Capris.) She waited twenty minutes then impatiently went into the back bedroom, looking for her mother. Nancy heard her walking down the hallway and fearfully shouted, “Don't come in here!”

Dee opened the door to the bathroom and found her mother bent over the toilet with a wire hanger in her hand, slashing into the bowl. “What the hell are you doing!?”

“I've been constipated and haven't shit in a week. You should 'a seen the size of it,” Nancy explained, dropping the hanger in the toilet, turning towards Dee, forming a three inch diameter by attaching her thumbs and her middle fingers together. “It was this big. I had to chop it up.” She grabbed hold of the hanger and returned to slashing her turd.

Dee turned around and walked out as her impatience turned to amusement.

“Close the door!” Nancy commanded.

Dee sat back down at the kitchen table, sipped her coke and smoked her Capris.

Five minutes later Nancy walked in smiling embarrassedly, “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“My ditch, promise that if I die suddenly, you will kill my animals and bury them in that ditch.”

“You’re going crazy. Have you been taking your Zoloft? You need to keep taking your Zoloft. And quit eating all that fudge!”

“I ran out!”

“Of fudge or Zoloft!?”

“Both!”

The trip to Wal-Mart to fill her Zoloft prescription would prove tedious for both Nancy and Dee. Nancy did not want her daughter to go with her to Wal-Mart. Dee shopping excursion with her mother were conflicted, enjoying the mother/daughter time together. But who was the mother and who was the daughter began to plague Dee’s mind. She had caught her mom shoplifting one-too-many times and had noticed security catching on to the cancer lady’s five fingered discount shopping; needless to say, Dee was now more the parent than the daughter, forbidding her mother to steal. Nancy resented Dee. Nancy was a kleptomaniac, who inherited the disease from her mother, Wanda, an ugly Pollock, more masculine than feminine. As a teen Wanda was more than compelled, she was left with

no alternative but, to scavenge for food through the city of Warsaw, Poland, during World War II.

Nancy stuck utensils, napkins, salt and pepper shakers, creamers, maple syrup and sugar jars in her purse when she ate at restaurants. She changed the prices on clothes she would purchase, while stuffing a pair of underwear and sox down her pants. She short changed careless customers when she waitressed and tore up checks, not entering them into the register. But she was also generous. She would slip the Mexican bus boy an extra five dollars out of her tips before she blew him and tossed him a bone in the back of the kitchen. The dishwasher was ingratiated to her generosity as well. When Dee and I were kids, living in Los Angeles, it was not unusual to come home and find the television or sofa missing. She'd give away furniture to the newly arrived Vietnamese refugees migrating onto our street.