

Gertrude Goes to Church: A Windy Tale from the Piney Woods

by [Boyd Cathey](#) (August 2019)



Cindy and Chuck, Alice Neel, 1975

Gertrude Shmuck, our heroine, lives in the small, unincorporated community of Lizard Lick, North Carolina, made famous by the “reality” program on Tru-TV, *Lizard Lick Towing*. She comes from a long line of Shmucks. It is said by locals that Gertrude’s family settled in the area prior to the War Between the States, as peasant immigrants from the Rhineland in Germany. They may have been of Jewish origin, but that distant history is unknown. The name was most

likely originally spelled "Schmuck," but later generations were not very literate, and the name comes down to us as "Shmuck," and we are probably fortunate that the bearers at least left the "h" in the spelling.

At one time, Gertrude's grandfather, Caleb Shmuck, had been a prominent citizen of the area and a member of the Lizard Lick Primitive Baptist Church. But, alas, that church no longer exists, its members all having died off and their children no longer interested in old time religious practice, and many moved to bigger cities for employment. Caleb's wife Gladys died young during childbirth. He had attended old North Carolina State College and farmed a substantial tobacco tract, gaining some respectability locally, but whatever money he gained by that trade was quickly squandered by Gertrude's daddy and Caleb's son, Leon. As a young man Leon moved for a time to the big city (Durham) and got involved in pot smoking and loose living back in the "cultural revolution" of the 1960s.

Leon married four times before dying of alcoholism and heart disease. His wives got most of whatever he inherited or earned, or did not spend on booze and drugs. Additionally, the federal government's relentless "war on tobacco" and Leon's inability, like many of his neighbors, to transition to something equally lucrative in the modern economy spelled his decline. Such malaise seemed to be common in rural areas.

Gertrude, carrying on the family tradition, has also been married four times, all matrimones ending unsuccessfully in sometimes rancorous divorce. Now at age 48, Gertrude is, as the locals might colorfully describe it, "used up." Whatever youthful beauty she may have once possessed has evaporated due to heavy drinking, addiction to cigarettes—Marlboro Lights (at least three packs a day, when she has the money), bad food, and attempted wild living.

Presently unmarried and worried about a future that seems

to be closing in on her, Gertrude is on the hunt, once again, for a husband. Thus, this tale of her latest escapade, which comes from confidants of undoubted veracity and whose trustworthiness cannot be impugned.



Well, it seems that Gertrude Shmuck of Lizard Lick, North Carolina, has finally had a date . . . or something resembling one.

Actually, her friend Velma Norfleet told her just the other day there were a lot of single and divorced or separated men going to the New Beginnings Community Church, which is less than a mile from her single wide trailer. So, this past Sunday Gertrude put on her best Walmart see-through halter top and least dirty short skirt, and sauntered on down to the 11AM "share" service (she was late, due to a bad hangover, but she got there just the same).

New Beginnings is a relatively young church unlike some of the other houses of worship in the area. Older residents in Lizard Lick and the more conservative local Baptists label it "liberal," when they speak of it at all. Crazy things are taught there, some folks say. In front of its sanctuary there is a sign with the boldly-broadcast message that it is non-denominational. It reads: "The ONLY dogma we have is that we have NO dogma, we just LOVE all People!"

Its minister, Godfrey Gispough [pronounced "Giz-pooh"] is from up north, from Boston, Massachusetts, but came south to receive his theological and ministerial training at the Duke Divinity School in Durham, which may well offer insight into the origin of his progressivist views and "woke" attitude to religion. Locals recount that he spends a lot of his time in Raleigh demonstrating for illegal immigrants' rights and demanding legal protection for mosquitos, which he considers to be an endangered species.

At first, New Beginnings had few members. It caters to millennials, divorcees, and those who believe that Christianity should be all about social gospel and overthrowing historic white supremacy and toxic masculinity. There are few such folks in Lizard Lick. But since the Raleigh suburbs and new housing developments have crept steadily towards Lizard Lick, and as those new neighborhoods have brought in outsiders from up north with little sense of family roots or tradition, New Beginnings has experienced recent growth. Most of its attendees work over in the Research Triangle Park in high tech pursuits, a forty-five minute commute.

As a very young girl, Gertrude had gone to the Primitive Baptist church a few times with her granddad Caleb, but that experience is light years away now, from a different and more settled time and not even a clear memory. This trip to church, however, bespoke of adventure of a different sort.

Arriving at the small but neat sanctuary, the first thing she did was ask one of the ushers for a smoke, but, looking surprised, he told her that smoking was not permitted. "Damn! God, I gotta have a smoke," she said, but persevered nonetheless.

She found a seat towards the back, near the aisle—better to scope out the men folk, she thought. Almost immediately a man, probably in his late 40s or early 50s, but not unhandsome, came in quickly and sat down right beside her. "Damn," she said quietly to herself. "He ain't half bad looking!" She kinda edged a little closer to him, and during the hour long "share service" (which she paid absolutely no attention to), her worn flip-flops touched his cordovans. It was love at first touch, or so she told herself . . .

Still, she hesitated to look at him straight in the face, much less in the eyes.

At last, after an interminable commentary from Reverend Gispough about endangered mosquitos and saving the whales—critical issues right there in Lizard Lick—and after mistaking the call to come forward to affirm her belief in social justice as a chance to go up and collect a welfare check (when she got there expecting a hand-out, she only got an exhortation to fight poverty!), the service finally ended.

Gertrude now decided that this time, in this environment, she simply wasn't gonna let Fate slip away from her. After all, that guy next to her wasn't bad looking, and as he went to church, well, she thought, he just simply *must* have some money.

But, in the back of her mind something nagged at her . . . this man seemed a bit familiar. She just wasn't sure how or what that meant. But, nevertheless, NOTHING was gonna stop her from plying her feminine charms (if long ago extinguished) on this promising candidate for future matrimony.

"Hey fella, nice service weren't it?" she blurted out to the man as they walked together out the front door of the church.

"Nice enough," he responded, but not looking at her straight.

"Well, my name's Gertrude—Gertrude Shmuck—and I'm a single lady, and I just love to make new friends."

"I know who ya are . . . I know ya," the man quickly added.

"Ya do?" exclaimed Gertrude, a bit troubled, for although the man seemed a bit familiar to her, she was certain that she had not met him before . . . or so she thought.

"Gertrude, doncha remember me? Delbert Suggs . . . I was yer husband thirty years ago!" he exclaimed.

“Aw, God damn and double-damn! I do recognize you now—well, son-of-a-bitch, you look like you’re doing okay,” Gertrude blurted out loudly, just as the two of them passed by Reverend Gispough’s outstretched hand at the front door, who appeared a bit taken aback by the exchange. Gertrude ignored him. All her thoughts centered on this intriguing and masculine, if weathered, hunk.

“Oh,” halting in mid-step Delbert suddenly exclaimed: “Reverend Gispough, this is my friend Gertrude Shmuck. We used to be married many years ago. She lives close by.”

“Nice to meet you,” replied the good reverend, a newly-formed smile on his face. “I hope you will come join us often . . . and join our efforts to fight for social justice and against systemic racism in Lizard Lick!”

“Well,” responded Gertrude, oblivious to the nuances of his pastoral outreach, “I don’t like that no smoking thing. I gotta have my cigs. Ain’t nothing wrong with Marlboros—they’re good fer ya, help keep my weight down, and good for my nerves.”

Continuing on the couple reached the church parking lot where Delbert’s late model Nissan Titan XD pickup was parked. “Man, you got a new Nissan Titan? Damn, that’s impressive!” she exclaimed.

To which Delbert replied: “Nothing but the best . . . just foreign cars for me. I got a Mercedes S-Class at home! None of that American junk that’s causing all the pollution!”

Taking it all in, the intrigued Gertrude continued: “Delbert, I don’t remember much after high school and when we got hitched. That was so short! I don’t even remember why we split. It was so long ago.”

“Well,” Delbert answered, “I got to running around with a bad crowd, did some minor theft, you know. But then things got

really bad. Got sent away for grand theft auto and bank robbery and served time in Central Prison. Got out five years ago."

Then, obviously showing interest in his feminine companion, Delbert inquired: "So, what about you?"

"Well, after you I got hitched up three more times. Every time it was a disaster. The longest was with Tommy Lee Potts. You remember him? He played football for Lizard Lick our senior year, got caught sleeping with his half-sister and got sent to juvenile hall, but didn't last long there. We met when I was doing some go-go dancing at Frankie's Dance Club. You remember that? It was out Route 97, and the tips paid good. I was pretty good lookin,' too, with curves in all the right places," as she giggled in the unique girlish giggle she had never lost despite the decades of hard living, drinking cheap beer, and incessant chain smoking. "Tommy dropped a ten spot in my g-string, and smiled at me real sexy like. That was it! He stayed after closing, we met up, had a few, got snookered, and he proposed to me right there on the spot!"

"Damn, Gertrude," exclaimed Delbert. "That was quick!"

"Yeah, it was, but he knew how to make me scream—sorta like you!"

"So, how're YOU doing now?" Gertrude continued.

"Well, I got lucky," Delbert replied. "Opportunity struck. After Central, I made it big time. I had to adjust to what was happening. Went into Johnston County and took over some meth labs from the Mexicans, got a whole bunch of'em working for me right now twenty-four hours a day. Damn good workers, and I ain't gotta pay no overtime or social. It's all profit, no taxes, just steady money rolling in. It's better than making bootleg or dirt poor farming any day!"

"Those Mexican gangs—the coyotes—smuggle them in cheap by

the truckload," he added. "And I can use as many as I can get. I got dealers now all over the Carolinas, even Georgia. High schoolers love what I got."

"I keep my Mexicans housed in some second-hand trailers mostly or in used RVs that I pick up cheap. The county takes care of their kids in school, free lunches and all that, and if they have medical issues, well, I send'em to the emergency room at Johnston Memorial. It's all free! So I don't have to pay nothing. That's why I don't wanna hear no talk of no damn border wall," he grinned. "I don't care what happens at the border as long as I get my money!"

Stopping briefly to catch his breath—and his thoughts, Delbert continued: "And a year ago I was able to buy myself a nice three-bedroom house over in Lazy Meadows, you know, that fancy new gated development off Edgemont, full of Yankee transplants . . . and, then, well, I even joined the Civitans. It's the American dream." His grin was even more pronounced and broader as he uttered those words.

"You know, Gerty"—that was his pet name for her from decades back—"we live in a different society today. The old ways are dead, and we gotta change with the times. This is a new progressive America. We gotta have social concern, you know, like me with my Mexicans."

"I'm a respectable businessman now!" he added with a suddenly serious social consciousness and pride that seemed to radiate exuberantly in his tone of voice. "I'm registered to vote . . . as a Democrat."

But Gertrude wasn't listening to his attempt at social commentary. No doubt she wouldn't have understood it if she had. After all, as long as she continued to get her government checks and her Medicaid, she was more or less content. Delbert's new found concerns, if they had ever entered her mind at all, had long since perished on piles of empty beer

cans, too many broken matrimonies, and ill-conceived hopes. Indeed, it is quite doubtful she had ever heard similar talk from her daddy Leon, so deeply affected as he had been by the cultural revolution of the 1960s and the failure of the farm economy. And by her high school years—the late 1980s—she wouldn't have heard it there, either, only the progressive platitudes about sex and “free expression” that abounded even then in the public schools. Indeed, as Delbert declared, the old ways in so many regards were dead. New ways of thinking had triumphed, and both he and Gertrude were products and recipients of that fretful legacy.

By this time, all Gertrude could see was visions of greenbacks dancing before her eyes...this man had made it really big, and even if she had gone through him nearly thirty years ago, hey, this thing had potential...and potential was exactly what she was looking for at this moment. Indeed, with the right moves, Gertrude could even imagine exchanging her old single-wide trailer for a newer double-wide at the Happy Valley Trailer Park, or perhaps even better—a place in Lazy Meadows with her former beau. The future beckoned.

“Hey, Delbert,” Gertrude now declared. “It's after noon. What about me and you a-going over to Lonnie's Bar & Pool Hall for a couple of cool ones, and then maybe we could go over to my trailer? I still scream like a banshee when a man puts his arms around my waist. And I bet you're still the sexiest guy in east Wake County, ain't you?”

At this recollection, Delbert cracked a broad smile on his weathered face, perhaps remembering times past of smoldering passion and ecstatic love-making with his first wife (even if their marriage lasted only three months). And, just as Gertrude saw flickers of greenbacks, Delbert, who had taken three large doses of Viagra and one of Cialis that morning before church, saw a chance to reassert his rapidly flagging masculinity and adding some much-missed zest to his now fairly routine life.

“Okay, you wanna head over to Lonnie’s? Sounds good to me, let’s go,” offered Delbert.

So, Gertrude hopped into his late model Titan XD and off they went. But within a couple of minutes, as they scooted past Harlan’s Red and White market, Gertrude hollered: “Wait, Delbert! Can we stop for a short minute at Harlan’s. I need some bread and water. Won’t take but a minute, and I’ve got my food stamps on me.”

At this, Delbert obligingly turned into Harlan’s mostly empty parking lot and stopped. “Why you buying water?” he inquired. “Well,” responded his companion, “you see, the county said my well is bad, and I ain’t got enough money to fix it. Too much commercial development nearby with bad pollution, I think. So I buy drinking water, but I can use the bad water for other things.”

“Okay,” replied Gertrude’s partner. “I’ll just wait in the truck. Okay?”

Now, Gertrude bounded out the door for Harlan’s, but within a few minutes she was back at Delbert’s window. “Hey, sweetie, can I borrow about fifteen dollars? I don’t have enough with my food stamps to pay for what I got.” And, without a word, Delbert obliged.

Within another five minutes our heroine emerged with a carton of Marlboro Lights and a case marked “Coors Beer” on the side, placing it in the truck bed.

“I thought you were buying bread and bottled water because your well water is bad?” asked Delbert. To which Gertrude replied: “Yeah, well, they had a special on Coors, and I don’t need no bread or water if I got beer and cigs. I couldn’t use my stamps, and I only had a twenty in my pocket. But this will last me a while, at least until Monday when I get paid...and it’s just as good as bread and water. I saw that on the Sally Jessy Raphael TV program—beer is a good source of

protein and maybe even a food group or something. Did you know that?"

Delbert nodded, and immediately they were back on their way to Lonnie's, the first customers to reach the bar and pool hall at opening time at 12:30.

Easing up to the bar, Delbert demanded, "Make it a Pabst Blue Ribbon for me." Then, "And what'll you have, Gerty-baby?"

"Ah, well," stammered our heroine, thinking BIG, "I'll have a Bud Light, a tall one."

These were just the first of innumerable rounds. By 2:45 both Delbert and Gertrude were feeling no pain, and their sentences, which normally made little sense, now made hardly any sense at all. Genuine conversation had devolved into mostly a series of grunts, hiccups, and half-sentences, drowned out in large part by very loud music emitting from the juke box (which seemed to play the same tunes by Garth Brooks and Miley Cyrus over and over again), and punctuated by increasing runs to the restrooms.

And their clumsy efforts to "make out" a bit there in the bar were going nowhere either.

About 3 p.m., Delbert leaned over whispering in a slobbering and indistinct voice into Gertrude's ear: "How 'bout yer p-p-place . . ." And Gertrude, half lit but still conscious, responded in her best slurry speech, "S-sure."

But, with plenty of alcohol safely consumed, just as they were summoning up every bit of energy to aright themselves and stand up straight without holding on to the bar counter (or each other), into Lonnie's entered two youngish men, one white and androgynous, but with a fashionable Mohawk haircut and tats on his arms; the other, ebony black and on the obese side, with finely-twirled dreadlocks and a large gold ring

through his nose. The white man walked briskly and seemed to glide in a kind of dainty tip-toe across the stained floor of the bar. He looked to be around twenty-five or so, attired in expensive-looking Old Navy and Banana Republic gear with enough jewelry hanging round his neck and wrists, and from his pierced ears, to fill a Tiffany's storefront.

His black friend, equally attired in glittering and overpriced finery, stood somewhat aloof, letting his white companion do the talking.

"Mama, thought I might find you here!" he exclaimed in a high-pitched but not unpleasant voice. "It's Sunday, and this is the only beer joint open."

"Junior, what'cha doing . . . what-cha want?" responded the half-lit former femme fatale, a bit surprised. And then turning to her new beau: "Oh, Delbert honey . . . this is . . . uh, Junior...my"—hiccup—"son by, hmm, Tommy Potts," while bracing herself. "You didn't know that . . . er, and that feller with him is his roomie Tarquin Showalter."

"Nice duh meet ya," muttered Delbert.

Paying no attention whatsoever to Gertrude's new beau, Junior continued: "Mama, can I borrow some money. Last week I lost my rent money in a craps game, and now I owe Tarquin the rent, and I can't pay."

"M-m-Monday I get paid . . . come by then and maybe, ah, I can help," our heroine blubbered.

At this response Junior and Tarquin quickly exited, leaving the two lovebirds holding on to the bar counter and each other for dear life, the Pabst Blue Ribbons and Bud Lights having worked their charms. And Gertrude proceeded to offer additional enlightenment about her son:

"Junior works part-time at the Waffle House, and rooms

with his friend Tarquin Showalter. Junior wants to be an actor or som'pin...I think. I know he dresses up, goes on stage, and"—hiccup—"does karaoke. Makes good money at it. Lots of tips. Junior tells me he calls himself 'Flora Flawless'. It's a stage name, I think"—hiccup. "I'm not sure what Tarquin does—maybe a hairdresser or som'pin"

Delbert just smiled. Down deep he had a vague idea of sorts about what Gertrude's description seemed to imply. But he kept to himself whatever discordant thoughts about the matter he may have had or perhaps might have entertained had he been fully sober. This was not the place—and certainly not the moment—to bring up such matters. Finishing a half-smoked cigarillo and the last swallow of his by now warm Pabst beer, he tugged at the object of his affection.

"Let's go, honey."

And Gertrude, once more her focus turning to her partner and this unfolding high adventure, responded by grabbing onto Delbert's arm to balance herself and make it out the door of Lonnie's to his waiting pick-up without falling.

Hopping back into the Titan XD, within five minutes they were at her single-wide. As soon as the front door was shut and both were safely inside the grimy structure, first things first: Gertrude attempted to light one more Marlboro. "God, I gotta have a smoke!" she exclaimed. But it took her three tries, as in her inebriated state she couldn't align the lighter with the cigarette. Only with Delbert's steadying assistance was she finally successful in her efforts.

There followed another round of quickly-consumed beer from the just-purchased case of Coors, and another chorus of grunts and unintelligible words which defied all meaning.

Finally, both our characters stumbled into a small alcove bedroom where Gertrude's unmade bed appeared ready for a fleeting moment of passion.

Gertrude, tipsy and unable to stand up for any length of time without supporting herself on her dresser drawers, began to disrobe, or at least, try to disrobe. Her efforts, alas, proved mostly unsuccessful, and each time she tried to unbutton her halter top, she became confused, and ended by re-buttoning it up again. What she WAS able to reveal to Delbert's prying and blood-shot eyes was wrinkled flesh that had obviously seen far better days, and, indeed, one wonders how any man of any age, without the benefit of a dozen Blue Ribbons, would have found it enticing.

Now Delbert sat down on Gertrude's unmade bed and proceeded to attempt to remove his polyester pants one leg at a time, but before he could succeed in such a monumental task, he slumped over the bed, dead drunk and dead to the world.

"Whas goin' on Delbert?" Gertrude slobbered, punctuating her entreaty by hiccups. "Come on, wake up . . . I'm"—hiccup—"I'm ready fer ya right now!"

But it was too late; Delbert had passed out cold, and had succumbed to the Spirit of Morpheus, and would remain deep in peaceful slumber until Monday, when Gertrude would have to leave him there, still out of it, as she left for her job at the Square-D textile plant . . . and maybe earning a few dollars to lend to Junior, as long as it didn't interfere with her Marlboro budget. Alas, the modern American dream of success would continue to elude her, and the promises of progress and unlimited freedom would mean only a grinding routine and despair for our heroine.

All in all, not a good day's labor. To herself as she left her trailer Monday morning and revved up her rusted 1984 Chevy El Camino, Gertrude muttered: "Next time I take Velma's advice, I should have my head examined."

"God, I gotta have a smoke!"

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