

“My Family Was A Little Haywire” published by: Down in the Dirt Magazine

## My Family Was A Little Haywire

My family was a little wacky; I suppose like everyone's and it wasn't *all* my fault. The school officials thought I was Profoundly Retarded since I couldn't talk and my head was disproportionately large.

Officials strapped me on the special bus like the others, although I never acted up. I rode with my feet and hands tied down all the way to Delta with the other severe and profoundly retarded children. I didn't know it was okay to sing in school, or I would have proven that I didn't belong in this jail. I thought the other kids were interesting, except that they drooled, slopped food everywhere, and ate their poop. That was disgusting!

For the next two years, I was rather traumatized.

Wouldn't you have been?

I taught myself to read, write, and do math with my brother's help. He's eight years older and my best friend.

I was there until Buzz got his driver's license. He'd been frothing at the mouth to break me out of the little prison with a dozen other children and three adults. My parents were uneducated farm people and didn't know better. The first day he could drive by himself, he walked into the room and said, “Banjoy, sing something.”

I have a wonderful voice, so they say, and nearly I became a star when in high school because I couldn't speak without singing. I sang out, “Thanks Buzz, for coming

to see me, it's about time, I've done my time, but I'm ready to be free and do what everyone else minds."

The three adults stared in complete shock – they couldn't believe I could talk.

Buzz said, "Of course Banjoy can speak, she does it through singing. She's brilliant!" Disgust was written all over his face. "She's smarter than everyone in the family. She doesn't belong in this room." He handed the teacher a thick spiral notebook filled with my carefully printed stories and four-digit division problems, along with an essay on the history of the American Indians.

Mrs. Parker and her assistants chattered like magpies.

It wasn't long before the school psychologist tested me, and soon, I was in a regular class with students my age. I was above third grade level.

I took a deep breath. My journey was beginning.

Maybe it was our last name, the Hicky's. You know, like the comedy TV show, *My Name is Earl* – Donnie and Earl Hickey. We were poor like them, but instead of living in the South, my older brother and I grew up in Western Colorado on an apple farm. We got hailed out or frozen out nearly every year.

Our parents, Merle and Mertle, both worked at the stinking sugar beet plant in Delta to get by. Their clothes smelled rancid like the beet pulp, and cigarettes constantly hung from their lips as if they were Humphrey Bogart's long-lost children.

All the relatives wanted my mom to name me after them, and she was afraid to leave anyone out. My legal name is Maria Margeritra Mary Mercedes Mireya Malena Martinez-Hicky. I was the first baby girl.

Grandpa often sang, “I came from Louisiana with a Banjo on my knee,” and tagged me with Banjo. Buzz changed it to Banjoy and it stuck. My name on my driver’s license is so tiny you need a magnifying glass to read it.

The wolves were always at our door. You’d have thought we were characters in a Russian novel, driving a dog sled through a blizzard. Mom darned our socks and patched our patched jeans with reused patches or sometimes our darned socks.

Despite being in my mid sixties, I clearly remember picking out a school dress at J.C. Pennys and putting it on lay-away until I managed to pay it off, just before third grade started. I turned eight on June 5<sup>th</sup>, the day I started picking fruit in the local orchards.

Buzz ran the wagon picking up the cherry lugs. Him, Earl and Elmer picked up a load and dumped the sour pie cherries into this big semi-truck tank. I was happy he got me on as a cherry picker so I could make payments on the dress, but it was hard. You had to wash up after work because your hands, arms and face were sticky from the juice and you couldn’t simply peel it off. Hated the feeling. Couldn’t stand having tags on my shirts. Made me feel creepy. But I enjoyed spreading wood glue on my hands and peeling it off after it dried.

We didn’t know we were poor since everyone in Delta County, except for the Hollenbecks, were as impoverished as us.

I started my journal when I was eight because Buzz wrecked Dad’s pickup. He was following his girlfriend who went riding around with this other guy. Claimed he tailed them to make them nervous and he didn’t *mean* to smack into the building just south of Main in Cedaredge when he was turning around. He was going so fast the crash moved

the log building off the foundation. The photograph of Dad's smashed-in pickup was on the front page. Everybody thought he tried to kill himself, despite him claiming, "I missed the brake and hit the accelerator."

I laughed when I saw it.

Mom said, "Banjoy, that's inappropriate! Your brother could have been killed."

Grandma Martinez called from Texas on Sunday, wanting to talk to him. "Banjoy, is your brother alright?" Grandma was psychic and read palms.

"Yes." I never said much. I simply sang or said nothing. Back in those days, they didn't know much about autism, but I've self-diagnosed. As I mentioned, I'm nearly nonverbal, take things literary, and miss social clues.

"Is he there? I need to talk to him. I was at mass this morning and had a terrible premonition he was hurt."

I handed Buzz the phone. He was handsome with blonde hair and blue eyes like Dad, while I looked like Mom who was Mexican with long slick black hair and brown eyes outlined by a thick Frida eyebrow.

Buzz didn't say much since he was embarrassed, just, "Yeah, I wrecked Dad's truck, and he's really mad so I'm grounded." He took a breath when she asked something. "I'm okay. Nearly broke my nose. The doctor said if I hit the steering wheel any harder, the bone would have driven into my brain and killed me."

I imagined Grandma's gasp of horror. Buzz was her favorite of all the grandchildren, nieces and nephews in her large Mexican family.

When he got off the phone, I gave him a long hug and sang, "Never, never go away, you're my finest man, my favorite stand, and I love you each and every way."

When I looked up, I saw moisture in his eyes and he kissed the top of my head. We were very close. He was my guardian and protector, and I needed one in a bad way since I didn't understand other humans. He'd do anything for me. I swore I'd never marry a man if he wasn't kind and gentle like Buzz.

Needless to say, he broke up with that dorky girl I never trusted. He told me about his first time with her since I could barely speak. She virtually raped him on the front seat of Mom's car. He didn't know how to do it. She screamed with pain when he finally got it in. Guess he's got a big one.

More on that later.

I was stunned to realize you had sex that way and it freaked me out, being a kid.

He was foolishly broken-hearted and depressed the rest of the summer. It was worse after Dad beat him in the field with a shovel for not irrigating right. Dad was pissed about the hail storm that ruined the apple crop that day and he took it out on my brother.

He limped into the house, holding his back, but he didn't cry. "I hate that man!" They constantly yelled at each other and it hurt my ears like the school bells and sirens.

He started coming out of it when football practice started because he was an all-conference defensive end last year as a junior. He wanted to make all-state and get a football scholarship since it might be the only way he could attend college and avoid the Vietnam War which was raging in 1968.

Unfortunately, the second game of the season, this jerk from Rifle High took his right knee out, and the doctor put him into a walking cast. The other kids called him, "Shit on a stick," or they'd walk up and say, "Hey, Peg leg, where's your parrot?"

Aren't kids sweet to each other? And they say I have social problems. At least I'm quiet and polite.

When the doctor took the cast off, he walked okay for one day, then woke up the next morning and fell to the floor when he stepped from bed.

Our dad had one hell of a temper and he yelled, "Get up and get to school, you lazy, good for nothing bum. You're faking it."

Buzz yelled back, "My knee went out and I can't walk. You can go to hell if you don't believe me."

Big mistake.

Dad didn't take kindly to back-talk. He was a WWII Navy man, and tougher than a chunk of steel. He had his electric shaver in his left hand as he went at Buzz with his right fist balled up.

Buzz lay in bed; he reared back and punched Dad right in the mouth. Split his lip open and blood gushed out. The one that had the cancer removed from smoking and sunburns.

Scared the pee right out of me.

Dad flew back, dropping his razor on the floor. When he got his feet under him, he stared for a half second at Buzz and yelled, "You better get the hell out of here and never come back, or I'll kill you." He stomped off to the orchards.

I don't think Dad saw me quivering there in the hall. If he had, I might have peed my silk panties a second time.

Buzz crawled, then fell out of bed and then he grabbed the shaver and smashed it on the floor. Instead of limping out, he lay back down, groaning with pain.

Mom rushed in. “What happened?”

Buzz said, “My knee went out and Dad said I was faking it, then he tried to punch me, but I hit him first.” His face was bright red. He had Dad’s temper but had never fought back before.

I was still stunned solid like a chunk of ice off the old Dad block. Had to squeeze my legs together.

“You better get some clothes and find somewhere to live. I think he meant it when he said he’d kill you.”

My brother gave me a big warm hug that melted me before he limped out on crutches. He planned to ask Earl if he could stay with him at his grandparents.

So now you understand why I started my journal. Our life was always full of exciting things. I should have started it earlier. You’d probably laugh. Especially about my early adventures as a “Severe and Profoundly Challenged” child.