

We like it here

Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose
And nothin' ain't worth nothin' but it's free ---

Kris Kristofferson

There has always been separation. Supposed work ethics and discipline, income and opportunity all come into play and are taken for granted. You are not like them, you worked, you provided, you became more secure with the passing of years. You sent your kids to college and retired modestly without financial burden. Now was the time to sit in an easy chair with a snifter of brandy and finish the book you just can't get out of your head. You have a home and can exhale without trepidation or fear of what the next day at work might unleash upon you. That phase of your life has become more distant, remote. The stress melts away like the ice in your lemonade you drank last weekend on a sunny afternoon.

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Getting out of bed at daybreak with the sound of birds gracing the sunrise I stretched and looked out the window at the acres of meadow and redwoods where I live. The sun's rays shifted in lasers through the redwoods forecasting another beautiful day. Stretching and rubbing my eyes, I could not believe what I saw from my second-floor bedroom. Two blue tents set up in the clearing before the grove of redwoods with a small campfire where a woman, a dog and two children were huddled around. Another person, maybe a boy in his teens was filling a jug with water from one of the many hose bibs scattered around the property.

My first thought was --- Dammit, I knew I should have bought that home invasion shotgun I saw on the Internet. But then again, how would that help? I wasn't going to shoot them. It would only be for intimidation, a threat, a symbol of power or at least a powerful pointer tool to escort them off the property. So, I had no gun. I dressed quickly and psyched myself up for a confrontation. I approached them slowly for them to see me and acknowledge that I was there. They did and the woman, somewhere in her late forties or early fifties, it was hard to tell, stood up and faced me.

Her hair was long and parted in the middle joined to one long braid in the back. There were streaks of gray and worry lines like small fans from the corners of her eyes. Her clothes were clean and neat, with jeans and a down vest outlining a flannel shirt beneath. She looked like any other camper you would encounter in the wilderness with smart clothing from a wilderness supply chain. The teenage boy came up and stood behind her off to the side a few feet away. He was a little rougher looking than the woman. He wore torn camo pants, a hooded sweatshirt and high-top tennis shoes untied. His hair wasn't long but unkempt over his ears with straggly facial hair probably due to his youth. No one was smiling.

"I hope you don't mind us camping here?" the woman spoke first.

"Well actually I do mind. This is my property and I did not give you permission to be here.

"We don't have to get permission," the teen said. "We stay wherever we want."

"Now Kyle," the woman turned and spoke to the teen. "Let's hear the man out."

Hear the man out. I thought what the hell is this? I felt as if I was being assessed, whether or not I was worthy enough to let them squat on my land.

"Well I would like you to leave as soon as you can." I wished I could have yanked back that qualifier --- as soon as you can --- but it was too late.

"We like it here. And I hope you come to understand that and share some compassion for us. We will leave when we can but it won't be right away." She simply stated.

"When then?"

"When?"

"Yes, when will you be leaving?"

"When we get tired of being here or you make it so difficult for us that we have to leave but I hope that doesn't happen. That could get ugly."

"Ugly? Do you seem to think that you are entitled to live where ever you want?"

"Yes we do. We are not outcasts. We are homeless that can be said but in true and ageless nomadic fashion and for right now this is our home."

I was dumbfounded in her positive assumption and taken back by her arrogance and sheer bravado. She was, without a doubt, sincere in her belief that her claim was justified morally and ethically correct. I learned from years of managing people that if you start out being too lenient it only gets harder later on to impose limitations that should have been in place from the beginning. I needed to make a firm response that let her, them, know that I would not sit idly by while they lived on the land I worked a lifetime for.

"I need you to relocate immediately as this is my property and you are trespassing. I will need to call the County Sheriff if you do not pack up and leave." I felt that his was a forceful decree that should be heeded.

"Well, when you place that call to register your complaint tell them that it's the Westbrook family that is residing on 'your so-called property'. They know us."

“What do you mean ‘your so-called property’?”

“Well a bank believes they own it or you might even believe you own it but you need to get used to the fact that land ownership has always been seen as a source of power and a recent development comparatively in the evolution of human history. We all have seen how that has run its course. The indigenous Indians of this continent though having lived here for perhaps thousands of years were shoved and replaced by others. We are reestablishing the connection between people and the land. You might view this land as your property, your territory. Obviously you certainly believe this but really you only own right to this land. The State can at any time claim eminent domain on any piece of property through litigation. We are a community of the State who could just as well claim eminent domain of this territory that you only hold rights to. We will forego the litigation process and proceed accordingly with faith.”

“With faith? You talk as if your invasion here is preordained.”

“Invasion is a rather strong word for a small contingent of four. We are making no attempt to conquer you but merely to cohabitate this plentiful piece of land. Acceptance by you we expect will make all of our lives easier.”

Beyond my property there was another 160 acres devoid of human habitation with a year-round creek. The forest is abundant with wildlife with a number of clearings to accommodate campsites.

“There are hundreds of acres of land beyond this land,” I pointed out. “I would prefer you to relocate somewhere out there.”

“How would that be any different?”

“Because I wouldn’t see you.”

“That’s true but less convenient for us. This is close to the road. It would be far too remote out there. We need access to civilization. We do have needs.”

I was exasperated. At every turn of the conversation things just seemed to get worse.

“And should I provide you a car to go to town?” I quipped.

“That would be kind of you but I believe you are joking. But I am glad you are coming around.”

I left it at that and walked away up to the house. I felt almost defeated but knew that this was all upside down. I did have a deed to this land and indeed it was partially owned by a bank in Texas but this was what I had strived to achieve through a series of houses and locations. I had paid my dues, worked 40 plus hours a week year in and out often without vacation. I savored this sanctuary and thought as if it was mine. I had to rethink this.

The next day the young man and the dog were playing Frisbee in the meadow, him sailing it and the dog leaping in the air catching it and bringing it back to him. I thought that this was a nice sight here in the meadow where usually I only saw deer. After watching a couple of throws and retrievals the guy unzipped and took a piss right where he was standing without any shame which was alright with me but then began to wonder where they shit. We all do and have to -- a biological function. It could get kind of nasty out there in due time without proper sewage

treatment. I felt I needed to address the situation and perhaps too hastily on my part without a viable solution besides sharing my house which I wasn't ready to do.

I approached once again and this time I felt as if I was trespassing walking into their compound and they came forth in a unified front to hear why I was there.

"Hey everyone. I know this might be a sensitive subject for you as it is for me but you just can't treat this piece of land that I do own as a public toilet."

The woman came forth quickly and almost too close to my face rallied "You have this preconception of nomadic people, who you want to call homeless as having no personal hygiene that like animals we shit as we walk or wherever we squat. We have respect for the space we live in and take care of that as has been done since the beginning of time."

That belied specifics but I didn't want to press the issue. I wasn't getting anywhere here so I left and went back up to the house to call the County Sheriff.

The Sheriff was sympathetic but was by no means providing any kind of solution.

"Well yeh that's the Westbrooks. They never break any laws outside of trespassing and some file complaints. In fact, we have never been able to do much about them even though I myself have gone out to talk to them and they have been very straightforward. They don't want any trouble, they just want to live, as they described, as all future families must."

That was that conversation as I imagined there would be many more. It defied logic or at least the logic configured in my head. Had I staged my entire life to think that a house and piece of land was a secure throne of longevity and happiness? It was if there was this beautiful machine producing thousands of beautiful products each day and then suddenly somebody, a woman in this case, throws the switch into reverse and all that wonderful and productive merchandise is being sucked back into the machinery grinding it up, chewing it, masticating it all up until what you thought was familiar is undistinguishable, it's pablum, a hairball stretched out on the rug you almost stepped in. My immediate presence and thought processes retire into adolescence verbiage --- Yo Mama, Yo Daddy. I can't deal with this situation. Certainly, I would need to rethink this.

The next day, after a very unfitful sleep, I thought a different approach might be the answer. I would give her family the sanctuary of the land and space we both now occupied. I would leave it at that because her reaction would either give me peace or trigger an unwanted response.

"Hey! I never got your name. I'm Trace and I might have come on a bit strong yesterday and I hear what you're saying."

The long-haired women with streaks of gray came up to me quickly and though she was shorter than me it felt like she was looking me straight in the eyes.

"My name is Adrienne and you're somewhat polite but I've seen dozens like you and have not been that impressed. Not impressed by your pompous and arrogant entitlement or the castle you live in. Not impressed by your nod to those not as fortunate as you but still you likely give

donations to rid the junk of your guilt in some form, smiles doubling down on your own ineffectiveness because you never know how to actuate change outside of changing the toilet paper roll and then when it is only empty. Not impressed by how you think you are so right.”

I thought I had come in peace but that didn't go as well as hoped.

The next day I took my coffee out onto the deck to observe the activities of my co-habitants. They looked like any ordinary campers cooking breakfast and adhering to the rules of the campground. I was impressed in that they seemed to be carrying on without worry of the outside world. I put myself inside theirs --- no house payment, no utility bills, no internet, no streaming, no property taxes, no job. I had remote envy even knowing that it might be deemed superficial. I had worked hard for these comforts and I thought that there is a fee to pay to someone, I never figured out who that was, I mean the government and lately I'm not so ready to pay. I love the flag, Betsy Ross and Francis Scot Key and I even buy into Paul Revere in a strange cavalier sense. I honor the Pilgrim, Patriot, colonist, citizen to voice a voice. But here I was trying to justify or at least rationalize why I wasn't OK with these people living on what I thought was my land. I guess I didn't want to debate the matter. I wanted them to know that it was me who had final say and that was would go down.

Adrienne walked up to the deck, she being much below me and looking up at me as I stood up as I thought was only the right way to proceed.

“Would you like to come down to share some tea with us?”

I was still rummaging through Paul Revere and the Pilgrims and so the tea was a way out because truly I did now want to give them a chance. Chance? What was I talking about? I felt my privilege deflate and the balance became even.

“Sure, I'll be right down.”

I tried not to feel like a surrendering general but there was that feeling that I was now giving up something that was true to my heart; was truly sacred. I did not have platoons of men to fight my battle, to represent their hopes, desires and fears but I was with them for sure although they were nowhere to be seen. There are winners in the world and without them there would not be losers but is there ever compromise. Vegas rules apply here and the one who walks away with no one in pursuit is deemed champion. No one gets out alive Jim.

They had pulled some cut off stumps that I had stacked and made a very nice campfire circle facing not towards my house but to the forest. The fire was in embers but occasionally oscillated orange and yellow flames towards the teapot. Adrienne had an iron poker she used to take the teapot from the fire and set it down on a log, a tree that I had cut down 3 years ago. It finally had some purpose.

Adrienne was very systematic in her tea presentation in that she was adhering to a procedure that was almost sacred in rights. There was the exact number of tea cups for us. They were tea

cups like you would have been served in Chinese restaurants but just a little bit taller, ceramic with blue and black insignias. She poured the tea into the cups on a burl platter and circled us and saying things like hope and trust and divine light. I was thinking that this must be some kind of tea to go over the top like she did about it and I sipped mine down. It was not hot, just warm and soothing and I felt it go down into my stomach and washing my insides just like you would flush a toilet. It tasted like mint but with a dirty overtone. Beets or potatoes, something from the earth. I suddenly felt a rush as if you had got up too soon, sort of dizzy but in control.

“Well that’s interesting tea Adrienne.”

“Just nothing but water and what we find on the Earth.”

The taste was not great but felt like you were drinking bread or some refined essence that you had always denied but now felt that it was completely palatable. I should have sipped it but for some reason just threw it down the hatch.

“What’s in it?” I finally asked

“Lemon and mushrooms.”

“What kind of mushrooms?”

“Well just the ones we found over there.” she said pointing to the denser part of the forest.

‘How do we know we won’t be poisoned?’

“Oh, I know my mushrooms and these are very special.”

How can you explain the rush, the influx of a kind of feeling in your head that supersedes all previous thoughts? A mind, like a computer with pluses and minuses, switches, on and off where you embrace the outcome only because that is what you signed up for. You signed a deal to connect with everyone and suffer the consequences. My thoughts were overtaken and I wanted more than anything to lie down and let whatever was coming my way would come because here I am, here I am dammit.

On the ground I saw how intertwined the underworld and plant life were in cohesion. They were helping each other and not at all fighting. I thought homogenous but then that was milk and I could see through this, no clouds, distinct and ever present. There were conventions of woodpeckers up in the trees jamming their beaks into the redwoods that sounded like jackhammers and I wanted them to stop so the trees could talk. They also have something to say.

Bugs began to crawl and I was OK with that. I let them be and wondered which ones would bite, which ones would fight if I chose to flick them off of me but I didn’t. I felt like I could repel the bugs only if they could accept my forgiveness for having to live in two different universes. I could not adhere to their curriculum and I know it would be hard to decipher mine.

The sun ascended until it beat down on me and I had to get up or roll over because the heat became something sudden that I really needed to avoid. I still had it in me. Had what? I was dead flat on my back seeing Fred and Barney in every cloud formation. Every so often one of the tribe

came over and looked down on me and I felt no threat. They were benign and I was disengaged. And then after I really don't know how many hours, I thought that it was a good idea to check in the house to see if I had enough food, just in case, to feed this crew. It was an endeavor I thought entirely doable but never made it a few steps before the young man in his teens approached me with a wine bottle and shoved it into my face and said with a smile. Have a drink of this. And I did.

It tasted sweet like an over ripe plum that you wished you had eaten a day earlier. It had a murky residue that hugged the glass bottle with legs.

Wow, I said, what is that?

Just some plum juice and a small additive.

A small additive? I had to enquire.

Well yes, a dilution of a psychoactive substance.

Did you ever think to ask about me? I asked. If I ever wanted to participate?

Choice is not an option he declared and especially not at this point.

Was I was strapped into a Disney ride to hell with no possible release? Where there would be no refund or even a coupon for another chance, another ride. I was destined to ride this buckaroo until I caved and cried like a baby or until I had the summit in view and there was nothing stopping me from standing on top of the mountain and shouting for all my life and no reason at all but just to shout. I felt removed but engaged and knew I had time to decide. Time I said is on your decide.

But time was sliding as the sun was sinking and I wasn't getting anywhere but safe in my complacency when Adrienne came over me looking down smiling. I had trouble interpreting whether it was a benevolent smile or of sinister nature.

"How are you?

I felt that this was a complicated question in which there should be many responses of which I could only respond with questions.

Is this your plan? I asked

We have no plans but to live. To live on in peace.

I see.

Do you?

Yes, I think I do.

Moments splayed into minutes into hours until Adrienne pulled and directed me into her tent where in moments of coherence I saw her wiping my forehead with a damp cloth, gazing into my eyes, feeling like she was gazing into my being. I knew where I was but didn't know who I really was. Was this me or was this a dream where I realized how much of my life I had been an imposter, trying to be someone I never could be, believing that I had successfully fooled the world, that my presence made a difference? It was not guilt or even shame but a realization that I

was really no better or worse, for that matter, than the next person. We are all struggling to get on, to feel or to gain a freedom we never had before or at least, recapture that freedom we had as a child. We work ourselves into a delirium of want, of success, all to be someone we were not before. To relish what we had in our innocence, our basic needs, perhaps is what we need to get back to. Simply said as I lay in Adrienne's tent with wave after wave of emotion and evaluation that pinned me down hard to the ground, hard as I ever found.

The dawn woke me with the heavy fog dripping down from the redwoods, a cadence of tapping on the tent I was in, trying to come to terms with where I was, what had happened and how I should proceed. I felt as if I was alone but then heard voices and an occasional clash of plates and glasses as if I was far off camping and was late for breakfast. I had been covered with a sleeping bag on top of an air mattress and though groggy headed was anxious to find my bearings. I unzipped the front of the tent and poked my head out. No way, I said to myself but I could not deny it. Up on the massive deck of my house I could see breakfast being served among the conversation and laughing of children. My house. But what was that I just experienced, a realization, an epiphany of truth and awareness that I would be a fool not to acknowledge.

Adrienne saw me and waved in a motion for me to come up and join them. It was an invitation.

Not a word was spoke between us, there was little risk involved
Everything up to that point had been left unresolved
Try imagining a place where it's always safe and warm
"Come in," she said, "I'll give you shelter from the storm"

melts melts