

Dixie and Tom.

As the massive, out-of-control wildfire approached Tom's cabin, which was nestled in amongst the millions of acres of forest in Northern California, Tom began to think about what he wanted to do. He had nowhere to go; going anywhere would entail being, once again, amongst people. Tom's reason for living in his small cabin in the woods, eight miles from the nearest town and with only a few neighbors scattered quite far from his place, was to escape throngs of people.

The wildfire kept growing at a mind-boggling rate, sometimes by as much as one hundred thousand acres a day. Nothing the firefighters were doing was seemingly stopping or even slowing the wildfire from advancing. Entire towns, which had stood since they were established over one hundred and seventy-five years before, were incinerated overnight. The wildfire was now closer to Tom than at any other time. The fire was growing exponentially and was burning towards him mainly from the west, but the fire had split, so it was now also burning, entirely out of control, from the south and the north.

The air grew thick with the acrid smoke of forests being consumed. The fire was named Dixie, and Tom would laugh out loud as he compared the smell of her smoke to the perfume his grandma used to wear. He remembered his grandma's perfume was so strong that he could smell nothing else when she visited his parents' home. Tom's grandma's perfume was even more potent than the smell of the turkey roasting on Thanksgiving Day. "The smell of Dixie," he would say out loud, "is fresh today," or on other days, Tom would again say out loud, and to nobody, since he was alone, "The smell of Dixie is old today."

Soon, the emergency warnings began arriving on his cell phone. Emergency warnings were also broadcast on television. For people living near or where Tom lived, these warnings initially

warned them to get ready to evacuate. At first, the signs were to prepare to leave by gathering personal belongings and storing them in the vehicle you would be driving out in.

Soon after the warnings to prepare to evacuate came the Mandatory Evacuation Orders, which did not include the Peninsula where Tom lived. The wildfire was now within four miles of Tom's cabin, and was estimated to have consumed four hundred thousand acres and was only thirty percent contained. Tom was watching the morning fire reports from the firefighters on YouTube, and he learned that a significant fire break, built to stop the fire from advancing toward where he lived, had not contained the fire. According to firefighters at the scene, Dixie had gone over the fire break as if it did not exist.

Tom was learning new words and new insights about forest fires from the firefighters who were using some cabins donated by their owners for the firefighters to use. Tom discovered that forest fires could create weather, including strong wind, which can drive the fire so quickly forward that firefighters cannot keep up. The wind a forest fire makes can blow burning embers miles in front of itself, igniting spot fires.

Fear, trepidation, and even panic replaced the tranquillity that had existed before. Soon, a Mandatory Evacuation Order was issued for the entire Peninsula where Tom lived. Tom watched as the road near his cabin got busy with cars, trucks, and RVs, many towing boats or trailers full of belongings. Tom had nowhere to go, and Tom didn't want to go anywhere. Tom decided to stay where he was, in his beloved cabin in the woods.

After most people had left, the fire burned power lines, and the electricity went off. Then the fire burned the only cell phone tower, so Tom had no phone. But Tom did have a generator, and his generator was one he had bought new only several months earlier. This generator provided more

electricity than his old one, and it was an electric start, so that made his life easier. Tom used the generator sparingly, though, as gasoline was in short supply, and the loud noise from the generator bothered him.

With his generator running, Tom had internet, but soon, Dixie burned those fiber lines and the wooden poles they were strung on. Tom's only source of information now was from his cell phone and satellite TV connection, limited to when his generator was running.

Tom learned that while staying on your property during a Mandatory Evacuation Order was legal, leaving your property for any reason was illegal. Tom was out walking when the local California Highway Patrol stopped him, and after the law was recited to him, he was given a stern warning not to be off his property again, or he could be arrested.

Soon, Tom watched sheriff's cars from all over the state patrolling the Peninsula where he lived. Tom watered a few of his neighbors' plants and fed a cat. Tom also began watering the local nursery, which proved to be a much larger project than he had bargained for, and watering the nursery took nearly six hours. Yet Tom had committed to watering the nursery, and he continued. He watched the flowers, bushes, and trees, all severely stressed from a lack of water, begin to respond to his watering. Bees and hummingbirds, which had been only a few, soon returned in numbers greater than he could easily count. Of course, many plants had died, but Tom watered them anyway, always optimistic they might survive.

Soon, the fire had surrounded the Peninsula. All the roads, which had been his way out at one time, were now cut off by Dixie. Tom didn't mind hearing that news since he was not planning on leaving. However, the state and federal firefighters' command now issued an Imminent Fire

Danger Warning, so even those who had stayed after the Mandatory Evacuation Order were again being ordered to leave immediately. Tom decided to stay.

Tom had made several friends with the firefighters who stayed at the cabins near him. The local market owner had donated all the perishables to the firefighters, and Tom would help carry food from the local market to the firefighters. The firefighters thanked Tom and the others helping for their generosity, and Tom would always respond by saying, “Thank you, but this is our way of thanking all of you!”

One day, Tom asked a firefighter if he thought the Peninsula was a safe place to stay. The firefighter responded that he was not allowed to speculate about that. Tom thought momentarily and then asked the firefighter, “If you felt there was imminent danger in staying here, would you stay here?” The firefighter looked at Tom, smiled, and replied, “No.” Then they both laughed a hearty laugh.

Cell service had now been restored, but the power and internet were still out. With the power off, the local gas station was out too since it had no generator, and with him having already been warned about leaving his property in search of gasoline, Tom was not about to leave his property again. Tom remembered he had gas in his boat, and he began siphoning that into five-gallon containers to pour into his generator’s gas tank.

By now, Tom had packed his truck with belongings he did not want to lose should his beloved cabin burn. Tom packed his dog’s ashes, cash, firearms, insurance papers, wallet, pictures, and clothes, but soon the truck was full. Tom planned to drive his truck to the lake’s edge and leave it there. Then, should the fire get close, he would walk down to the lake and wait there for the fire to pass.

Tom drove his truck to the lake, and as he walked back, he noticed two fire engines stopped at the driveway to his cabin. He shouted a friendly hello and walked to them. They all exchanged warm greetings and shook hands. Tom knew several of them, and they knew him. The gathering of men soon grew somber as the fire chief began talking to Tom in a grave voice. He told Tom the fire was only a mile away, to their north, and he pointed in that direction. Tom listened intently as the chief spoke. The chief told Tom that the wind's direction would change about six o'clock that evening and that the wind's speed was forecast to increase to more than thirty miles per hour. Looking deeply concerned, the chief continued, "If that happens, Tom, there's nothing we can do to save the Peninsula. Embers will shower down from Dixie, and we won't be able to stop the ensuing fires." A silence descended on the group, and then Tom spoke, "Well, thank you for telling me that. My truck is parked down at the lake's edge, and that's where I'll be if the fire reaches here. So please, don't come looking for me, as I won't be here." With that, each firefighter shook Tom's hand and wished him good luck, and they left.

At six that evening, Tom walked down to the shore and waited. Tom noticed a tall column of smoke from across the lake near the dam. He had learned that this column of smoke was called a pyro cumulus cloud and was created by the forest fire. As he watched, the plume of smoke, rising vertically, suddenly bent forward about fifty feet from the ground and ended up nearly horizontal. Tom had no idea what that was all about, as he had never seen it before. The wind out of the south did indeed drop as the fire chief predicted, and soon, the wind began hitting his face, which meant it was coming from the north, again as expected. Tom waited, and he waited, and he waited for two more hours, and then he realized that a miracle had indeed just occurred and that the predicted high winds had not arrived. Tom drove his truck back to his beloved cabin.

Later that evening, friends living hundreds of miles away phoned to tell him to evacuate, as they were watching the news and the fire was right next to him. Tom tried to reassure them he was fine. Tom's daughter also phoned, but she wasn't buying the saying "I'll be fine," She yelled at him to leave immediately. "You're the only father I have!" she screamed. Tom laughed as he realized that even if he now tried to leave, he couldn't, as Dixie had surrounded his beloved Peninsula, and he was cut off from going. His daughter yelled, "You think this is funny?" and she hung up.

Later that night, and for hours, the emergency siren began their anxiety-invoking wail, and Tom saw a sheriff's car, emergency lights flashing, at the end of his driveway. Tom walked out of his cabin, and from the sheriff's loudspeaker, Tom could hear "Imminent Fire Danger. Evacuate now!" Tom flashed his truck's headlights twice, and the sheriff left, presumably to warn others who had also decided to stay. Over and over, the sirens blasted, but all that was visible outside was the thick smoke of the burning forests.

But again, Tom did not leave. The following day, Tom would learn that the small village, Canyon Dam, across the lake from where he had parked his truck, had been nearly destroyed by Dixie. That was the column of smoke he had seen the evening before. Later that morning, he was again talking to some firefighters. He recalled the dramatic plume of smoke and how it had dropped forward until it was almost horizontal to the ground. One of them told him that forest fires make their own weather, and as that plume dropped horizontally, the heat on the forest floor went from two thousand degrees to probably five thousand degrees. Then, the heat was directed forward, causing high winds that blew embers a mile or two in front of the fire. The firefighter told Tom, "As that column of smoke drops, it compresses the air beneath it, and the intense heat rising from the fire now blasts the fire forward, creating even more intense heat and wind.

Embers get blown forward, sometimes for miles, starting spotfires, and there's nothing we can do at that point except wait. That's why Canyon Dam burned to the ground last night. There was nothing we could do."

Tom walked home and thought about how Dixie didn't care about anyone or anything; in that regard, forest fires were similar to the ocean. Tom had seen the ocean up close and personal, and Tom knew the ocean would and did take the life of a diver or the lives of an entire ship and then carry on as if nothing had happened. Dixie was like that, too, emotionless. Dixie didn't even pause after burning the village. No, Dixie kept on going, continuing on her path of seemingly insatiable destruction. And yet, Tom thought, here he was, only affected by the wafting of Dixie's thick and choking perfume. Dixie's smoke was, at times, so dense he couldn't see down his driveway, and it was difficult for Tom even to breathe. Tom began thinking and believing that the Peninsula was indeed a magical and safe place to have chosen as his refuge.

Life became a daily ritual of watering his neighbors' plants, feeding the neighbor's cat, watering the nursery, and occasionally visiting the market that would open some mornings and was within walking distance. The sheriffs patrolling the Peninsula to stop looters had come to know Tom by now, and they would wave at him. Occasionally, Tom bought meat and cheese and his beloved cigars at the store. Tom's main supply of food was from the vegetable garden he had planted that spring, but being able to augment his vegetables with the occasional piece of meat, cheese, or bread was greatly appreciated by Tom. The nursery also supplied Tom with some ripe cherry tomatoes and apples.

Soon, Tom began hearing whispers that the fire had passed by. Power and cell phone service had recently been restored, and Tom had configured his cell phone to create a hot spot, so his computer now had internet again. He began reading and hearing that the Mandatory Evacuation

Notices were about to be lifted. Tom was happy to hear that news, of course, yet Tom had loved being one of only a few people who had stayed during Dixie. Tom had seen the shy silver fox almost every day, and indeed, the fox had begun walking right past his cabin, now seemingly unafraid. Deer had come by, and they seemed more relaxed than Tom had ever seen them.

Tom heard that the nearest town, Chester, had its Mandatory Evacuation Order lifted, so it was only a matter of time for the Peninsula's evacuation order to be lifted. Having the Mandatory Evacuation Order lifted meant postal service and garbage pickups would resume. Several days later, Tom heard that all evacuation orders around him, including the Peninsula, had been lifted. Dixie had indeed moved on and was burning vast forest areas, mainly to the north and east. More towns and villages were being evacuated constantly. Dixie was still deemed a threat to Tom's county, but she was only a threat if the winds changed and increased rapidly. That threat seemed to Tom without merit since most of the forests, except the tiny piece of land called The Peninsula, where he lived and a few other lucky places, had already burned.

Several days passed, and Tom drove to the nearest town for sunflower seeds to feed the squirrels. The Peninsula was untouched by Dixie except for the smoke and ash. Many small embers were blown onto the Peninsula, but they only landed as pieces of charred wood and caused no spot fires. There was no fire damage to the Peninsula whatsoever. As Tom left the Peninsula, he could finally see, and as far as he could see, miles after miles of burned forest and power and utility lines. The devastated forests were now blackened sticks that Tom could easily see through. The nearest town, Chester, had received some fire damage, but the firefighters had managed to turn Dixie, so she mainly went around the town. Tom drove to the village across the lake, Canyon Dam, where he had seen the plume of smoke days before, and it was incinerated except for the tiny Post Office. Tom had planned on driving further, but seeing Canyon Dam

gone was all he could emotionally absorb for that day. Tom drove home. Dixie had now reached a size of seven hundred and fifty thousand acres, and she was still growing but away to the north and east. There were many daily evacuation alerts to Tom's cell phone from the towns and villages still in Dixie's path.

A friend asked Tom how he felt about having survived Dixie. "Well," he said, "sharing feelings can be weird, right? So, I tend to think my way through life. Indeed, I have emotions, but I only share little bits of those. My most significant share about the Dixie Fire is this: Dixie was, and still is, a mean, insatiable, destructive, and uncaring fire, but Dixie was not like that to me. Oh, she showed me up close and very personally her might, meanness, and power to destroy without caring who or what she destroyed. But then, at my home on the Peninsula where I live, Dixie changed for a little while. She chilled for an entire day on August 5th, and then again, a week later, on August 12th, when she had me literally in her grasp, she stopped again. Her fierce winds stopped blowing, and her insatiable appetite was seemingly sated, if only for one day. Dixie stopped, hovered, and surrounded my home and the Peninsula. Dixie was so close I choked on the freshness of her smoke, her perfume.

And then, once more overcome by her natural fury and an appetite that could not be sated for very long, Dixie rose again. Oh, she left behind many embers as mementos of her closeness, and she left them scattered throughout my property and throughout the Peninsula, but Dixie, for some reason, was kind to me. Dixie wasn't mean to me. Dixie reminded me she'd been here; she reminded me in the days and weeks that have followed of her power and her heartlessness. "So, how do I feel? I feel like I was part of an event that is almost inexplicable. Perhaps God, or the Creator, and the universe all smiled on the Peninsula and me on the same days and at the same time. My humility and gratitude are both great. I feel no guilt that Dixie let me survive.

“I am but a speck of life on a planet located far out in a galaxy in a universe so vast it has been measured as infinite. And I, this tiniest speck of life, no more significant than a grain of sand on an endless sandy beach, survived despite having been in Dixie's grasp twice.

“Of course, I thank everyone who worked hard to save the other survivors and me. Thank you!

“I'll repeat that Dixie was and is a mean, insatiable, destructive, uncaring fire, but Dixie was not like that to me. And I'll bet that even the firefighters acknowledge the event each time Dixie spares someone or something, especially when she had them in her grasp. The firefighters, dozer operators, pilots, and everyone else saved an enormous number of lives and properties. And sometimes, Dixie just stopped for unknown reasons, and she didn't destroy what she so easily could have.

“Whether you are an atheist or a theist doesn't matter. The fact remains that Dixie was not mean to some of us.

“And that's how I feel.”

Tom had, yet again, wiped the dust away from inside his cabin. The dust from Dixie's smoke seemed to be on every surface, and now he sat alone in his dusted cabin. His thoughts were loud as he sat there alone, in the complete quiet of his cabin. *Staying during Dixie altered my life. I could never see her flames nor hear her crackly roar as 100-plus-foot trees exploded into 300-foot-high flames. I couldn't hear the trees or their limbs as some fell to the forest floor. But seeing the fire on the internet or television news, witnessing the denseness of her smoke, seeing her embers blown onto my property, smelling the pungent, acrid perfume, sometimes old yet often fresh, that wafted from Dixie, and the head-to-toe sooty firefighters I saw and spoke with regularly, offered enough vicarious proof for me that Dixie was indeed real. Her insatiable*

*appetite was bringing her relentlessly closer! The nearly incessant alerts to my phone were proof of how close Dixie was!*

*Imminent Fire Danger, Evacuate Now, they read. I didn't leave because I was sure I would be okay. Dixie was an out-of-control forest fire as she passed by the Peninsula and me. If you can imagine that when Dixie passed by here, she burned around the lake and became the shape of a donut, and the Peninsula was the hole, you'll have a good picture of how it was. All roads were undrivable due to fire. Then, there was the miracle that altered my life. This place here, this Peninsula, is extraordinary. It's sacred in ways I am not sure of, and I don't need to know how or why it's sacred for it to be true. I felt cradled and safe despite being literally surrounded by an uncontrollable, insatiable, half-million-acre forest fire all around me.*

*Those weeks, and the weeks since then, have been a time for me to commune with fellow residents and my god and be a part of a life-altering miracle.*

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © 2-16-2022