

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 no where to go, and 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 neighbours 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. Seemingly nothing that was being done was stopping or even slowing the wild fire 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 now than at any other time. The fire was growing exponentially, and it was burning towards him mainly from the west, but the fire had split so it was now also burning, completely out of control, from the south and from the north.

The air grew thick and stayed 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 literally could smell nothing else when she visited his parents' home. Tom's grandma's perfume was even stronger 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. These warnings, for people also living near where Tom lived, were initially warning them to get ready to evacuate. At first the warnings were simply 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 major fire break, built to stop the fire from advancing towards where he lived, had simply not contained the fire. According to firefighters at the scene, Dixie had simply advanced right 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 learned that forest fires can create their own weather, including their own wind, which can drive the fire so quickly forward that firefighters cannot keep up. The wind a forest fire creates can blow burning embers miles in front of itself, igniting what are called 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, and Tom watched as the road near his cabin got busy with cars, trucks, and RV's, many of them towing boats or trailers full of belongings. Tom had no where 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 was larger 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 really bothered him.

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

Tom learned that while it was legal to stay in your property during a Mandatory Evacuation Order, it was illegal to leave your property for any reason. Tom was out walking when he was stopped by the local California Highway Patrol 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 neighbours' plants, and he fed a cat. Tom also began watering the local nursery which proved to be a much larger project than he had at first bargained for, and watering the nursery was taking nearly six hours. Yet Tom had committed to watering the nursery and he continued. He watched the flowers, bushes, and trees, which had been severely stressed by their lack of water, begin to respond to his watering. Bees and humming birds, 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 completely surrounded the Peninsula. All the roads, which had been at one time his way out, 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 was issued were again being ordered to now leave. Tom decided to stay.

Tom had made several friends with the firefighters who stayed at the cabins near him. The owner of the local market 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 for a moment, 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, Tom was not going to leave his property in search of gasoline. 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, his cash, his firearms, insurance papers, wallet,

pictures, clothes, but soon the truck was full. Tom's plan was 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 a friendly greeting and shook hands, and Tom knew several of them and they knew him. The gathering of men soon grew somber though as the fire chief began talking to Tom in a grave and serious voice. He told Tom that 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 direction of the wind was going to change about six o'clock that evening, and that the speed of the wind was going to increase to more than thirty miles per hour. The chief, now looking serious, 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 okay, as I won't be here." With that each fireman shook Tom's hand and wished him good luck, and with that 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. This column of smoke he had learned was call a pyro cumulus cloud, and was created by the forest fire. As he watched, the plume of smoke that was rising vertically suddenly bent forward and ended up nearly horizontal. Tom had no idea what that 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 predicted. 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 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 literally next to him. Tom tried to reassure them he was fine. Tom's daughter also phoned but she wasn't buying his "I'll be fine" routine, and she yelled at him to leave immediately. "You're the only father I have!" she yelled. 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 leaving. His daughter yelled, "You think this is funny?!", and she hung up.

Later that night the emergency siren began blasting, 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 trucks headlights twice and the sheriff left, presumably to warn any others who had also decided to stay.

But again, Tom did not leave. The next morning Tom would learn that the small village across the lake from where he had parked his truck, had been nearly destroyed by Dixie. That was the column of smoke he has seen the evening before. Later that morning he was again talking to some firefighters and he recalled the dramatic plume of smoke as it had dropped forward until it was almost horizontal to the firefighters, and one of them told him that that's how forest fires make their own weather. The firefighter told Tom, "As that column of smoke drops down, it compresses the air beneath it, and the intense heat that was rising from the fire now blasts the fire forward, creating even more intense heat and wind. Embers get blown forward, sometimes for

miles, starting spot fires, 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 was thinking about how Dixie didn't care about anyone or anything, and 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 from an entire ship, and then just carry on as if nothing had happened. Dixie was like that too; emotionless. Dixie didn't even pause after burning the village. No, Dixie just kept on going, and she continued 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 perfume was, at times, so dense he couldn't see down his driveway, and it was difficult for Tom to even 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 neighbours' plants, feeding the neighbour's cat, watering the nursery, and occasionally visiting the market, that would open some mornings and was within walking distance. The sheriffs' that were patrolling the Peninsula to stop looters had come to know Tom by now and they would wave at him. Occasionally Tom bought bread at the store, and his beloved cigars. 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 loaf of bread, was greatly appreciated by Tom. The nursery also supplied Tom with some ripe cherry tomatoes and apples.

Soon Tom began hearing whispers of the fire having 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 the Mandatory Evacuation Notices were about to be lifted. Tom was happy to hear the news of course, and 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 too seemed more relaxed than Tom had ever seen them.

Tom heard that the nearest town had their Mandatory Evacuation Order lifted, so it was only a matter of time now for the Peninsula's order to get lifted. Having the Mandatory Evacuation Order lifted meant postal service would resume, and well as garbage pickups. Several days later Tom heard the news that all evacuation orders around him, including the Peninsula, had been lifted. Dixie had indeed moved on and was burning vast areas of forest mostly to the north and east. More towns and villages were being evacuated constantly. Dixie was still deemed a threat to the county Tom lived in, but she was only a threat if the winds changed and increased dramatically in speed once again. That threat seemed to Tom to be without merit.

Several days passed and Tom decided to drive to the nearest town for sunflower seeds to feed the squirrels. The Peninsula was untouched by Dixie except for the smoke and ash, and the many small pieces of charred wood which had been blown onto the Peninsula. There was no fire damage though. As Tom left the Peninsula he could finally see, as far as he could see, mile after mile after mile of burned forest and power and utility lines. The forests were now blackened sticks which Tom could easily see through. The town nearest him had received some fire damage but the firefighters had managed to turn Dixie so she went mostly 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, except for the tiny Post Office, incinerated. 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 still many daily evacuation alerts to Tom's cell phone from the many towns and villages still in Dixie's path.

Tom was asked by a friend 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. Certainly, I have feelings but I tend to only share little bits of those. My biggest 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, her meanness, and her power to destroy without caring who or what she destroyed. But then, at my home on the little Peninsula where I live on, Dixie changed just for a little while. She simply 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 whole day. Dixie stopped, she hovered, she had my home and the Peninsula surrounded. Dixie was so close I was choked by the freshness of her smoke, of her perfume. And then, once more overcome by her natural fury and an appetite that cannot be satisfied 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 non-religious god, the universe, and Dixie, all smiled on me and the Peninsula 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 somewhere far out in a galaxy located in a universe, so vast it has been measured as infinite. And I, this tiny speck of life, no greater than a grain of sand on an endless sandy beach, despite having been in Dixie's grasp twice, survived.

“Of course, I give great thanks to all who worked so hard to save not only me but all the other survivors. 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 each time Dixie spares someone or something, especially when she had them in her grasp, that even the firefighters acknowledge the event. Yes, the firefighters, dozer operators, pilots, everyone, saved an enormous number of lives and properties. And sometimes, for unknown reasons, Dixie just stopped, and she didn't destroy what she so easily could have.

“Whether you are an atheist or a theist doesn't matter really. 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 clean cabin. His thoughts were loud as he sat there alone, in the complete quiet of his cabin. *Staying during Dixie was simply life altering. 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 television news, witnessing the denseness of her smoke, seeing her embers blown onto my property, smelling the pungent, acrid perfume, sometimes old yet often new 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 and her insatiable*

*appetite was bringing her relentlessly closer! Proof of how close Dixie was were the nearly incessant alerts to my phone! Imminent Fire Danger, Evacuate Now, they read. I didn't leave, because I was certain I would be okay. Dixie passed by me and the Peninsula. That was the miracle that altered my life. This place here, this Peninsula, is special. 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 surrounded by a massive, half million-acre forest fire. Those weeks, and the weeks since then, have been a time for me to commune with the universe, with my god, and to be a part of a life-altering miracle.*

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © 2 16 2022