

## **The Drifter.**

The doctor was quite alarmed. He had ordered an x-ray be taken of an elderly woman's chest. This woman had lived her entire life on a remote Scottish island, and the X-ray had come back unlike any X-ray he had ever seen. He telephoned a doctor, the head of the training department at the medical school he had attended a decade earlier. The x-ray was forwarded, and several minutes later, his telephone rang. Upon answering and the usual niceties being traded, he was told that her lungs were pink because they were 100% healthy. The medical training doctor explained that his former student had only ever seen the x-rays of the lungs of people who lived in the cities. The woman's brother told this story to the drifter on the farthest inhabited island off the northern coast of Scotland.

That island was also the quietest place the drifter had ever lived, and he lived there for six months, followed by another six months the following year. The drifter marveled at the stunning natural beauty and the island's ruggedness as the North Sea encircled it. The drifter could only see a subsistence life if he lived on this remote island. The drifter wanted a lot more for himself than that.

Decades later, the drifter arrived in northern California in the mountains and a forest. This was 30 years and 25 countries from his time on that Scottish island. Here was rural, and to some degree, it was friendly, yet in other instances, the local people here seemed capable of being quite hostile and mean. Their first reaction to the drifter was to be polite, yet neither friendly nor accepting. The drifter, though much older now, was still an imposing character. He was tall and strong and looked at them clear-eyed. As interpreted by the drifter, their attitude was similar to his, which was a wait-and-see attitude. The drifter was outspoken when he said that he had not

moved here to make enemies, and he said those words to some of those he met to inform them he came in peace.

The drifter would find that many people living here were the relatives of families who had lived here for generations. Most of the work available here had been in the vast forests or the lumber mills, which employed a large percentage of the population. But as times changed, so did the lives of the people here. City people came and protested about the number of trees being harvested, the number of owls and woodpeckers dying because their habitat was being destroyed, and bitter legal wars began. Some protestors escalated the conflict by coming here to protest physically and driving metal stakes into the trees, which injured several workers and caused costly repairs to the lumber mill equipment. Tempers flared, and hatred was infused into the hearts of those on both sides. Finally, the protesters won the day, and life changed for the mountain people. Most lumber mills shut down, many woodsmen and their families were forced to relocate, towns and villages emptied, and all that was left in some places was bitterness and hatred. That bitterness was shared within the family sphere, but anger and hate were transmitted within the community's sphere of influence. And if someone still didn't adhere to the common perception that these flatlanders had ruined their lives, then peer pressure from living in such a tightly-knit environment got to them. Years later, not many people remembered the bitterness of those years, but all those within the local spheres of influence had not forgotten.

The drifter was never personally involved on either side of that fight and was told about the lingering bitterness. He learned quickly about the people he met; for a drifter, the initial information he gleaned became the barometer and the compass he used to see if he should stay or go. And while he felt the mostly repressed anger still in their hearts, he also felt that there wasn't an immediate, existential threat to him.

The real threat he felt wasn't from the older locals. The real danger he felt, only from a few people, was the threat towards him simply because he was different. The drifter was a happy man. A happy man and an optimistic man. He didn't care about many things that most people care about, and he didn't mind if you left him alone. The drifter liked to say hi and maybe indulge in a little small talk, and then he wanted to go his way. But on a few occasions, the conversation turned to topics he tried to steer clear of—issues like the news, politics, religion, race, and sexuality. The just-under-the-surface anger and hate often released during these conversations convinced the drifter not to engage with the people who insisted on discussing such things or engaging in any of the topics they chose to bring up.

The drifter managed to do well, too. His gregarious nature allowed him to carve out mostly shallow yet satisfying relationships with a narrow group of people. He even felt a small friendship had formed with some of those people. The group was small because the drifter felt many people here were mean. And their meanness wasn't camouflaged in any way, for their meanness was on the surface. They were mean verbally and even loudly, and many didn't care that they were mean. It seemed to the drifter that some were even proud of how mean they were and how much meaner they could be. In some ways, it was even scary. The drifter was a loner, but even loners like some friendship. He made the acquaintance of his nearest neighbors, who were very hostile. Of course, the drifter could be hostile if the occasion warranted hostility, but this drifter, like most drifters, preferred peace over aggression. The drifter often told others he preferred calm waters, meaning he wanted gentle conversations rather than hostile ones.

One day, his neighbors lit a fire on their property to burn pine needles they had raked. The wind blew the smoke onto his property and inundated his home. He mentioned this to his neighbors, and the man said, "Fuck you. It's a burn day! I can do what I want." Although surprised and

offended, the drifter wasn't a man who permitted anyone to talk to him like that. The drifter stood his ground, and the words got angrier; tempers flared, and his neighbor charged the fence with his fists clenched. The neighbor's wife began putting the fire out with her garden hose, and once the smoke had abated, the drifter went into his house.

The next time his neighbor saw him, he apologized, but the drifter told him it would take him a while to get over that confrontation. The drifter eventually forgave his neighbor, and life returned to a semblance of normalcy.

The drifter had bought this place in the mountains many years before moving there full-time. He had visited often, usually four days every two weeks, for the past decade and a half. He loved fishing and hiking the mountains, but once he was done working in the city, he sold everything and finally moved. His neighbors had done nearly the same thing and had only recently moved there full-time.

A seemingly benign question from the drifter about a truck being stored on their property ended in his neighbor going from friendly to aggressive instantly. More f-you's were exchanged, his neighbor tried more physical intimidation, and luckily, no punches were exchanged. Soon, the drifter forgave his neighbor once more, and in his forgiveness was the hope that his neighbor might finally understand that the drifter's heart was good and that living next to each other should be caring and harmonious.

The drifter had an odd quirk or rather another odd quirk that went like this: the drifter, in an existential talk, or especially in an adversarial conversation, would say something to whomever he was talking to, only his voice would be very steady, and his demeanor would leave no doubt as to how serious he was at that moment. If he needed to repeat himself, his voice would

become much louder, so there would be, or could be, no reason for you not to have heard him. If he repeated himself three times, he was done talking, and asking him again to repeat himself brought him to a stage where physical confrontation was not off the table. The drifter had been in too many fistfights, but his demeanor had also stopped many other fights. Many men have never been in a fistfight, and when the drifter finds this out, he is shocked because, for the drifter, fighting has been the natural progression of events in many of his confrontations.

As time passed, his neighbor told him he had a severe neck problem and that the cartilage between the vertebrae in his neck was gone, so it was bone-on-bone in his neck. He told the drifter he took large doses of morphine daily for the pain. The neighbor told him it had been over 20 years that he had been taking prescription morphine. In a separate conversation, the neighbor also told the drifter that his wife couldn't sit still, and the drifter soon became aware that she suffered from OCD. This was fully validated one afternoon when the drifter watched as she used a broom and swept the dirt in her backyard for several hours.

There's a saying that the drifter had learned that a life without deep meaning would lead to a life of pleasure. So, as the drifter watched her moving rocks and then rearranging them countless times, he understood her and her illness. There was no deep meaning in her life at all. The drifter didn't care about her or whether she had deep meaning in her life, but he did care about the constant noise her OCD generated.

The drifter's life here was good. He loved this place. The only problem for the drifter was the relationship with his immediate neighbors; try as he did, he could not solve or fix that relationship. He hiked and walked, fished, and lived a solitary life containing deep meaning. He didn't understand why his neighbors acted with such hostility, aggression, and selfishness, but they did. He yearned not to be so affected by their negativity.

After a fishing trip, the drifter cleaned several fish, putting the guts, carcasses, and skin in a pile outside for the critters to scavenge. A piece of skin got dropped on his neighbor's property by a crow or buzzard, and when his neighbor saw the fish skin, he went into a rage. He screamed at the drifter, "Fuck you, and if you ever do that again, I'll break every bone in your body twice." The drifter stood his ground and yelled back, "Fuck you! You're not big enough to break my bones, asshole!" Eventually, the drifter agreed not to put fish skins out for the critters, he forgave his neighbor again, and a semblance of sanity prevailed.

The drifter despised unnecessary noise. Excessive noise of any kind and at any time bothered him immensely. The drifter had moved here because it was generally much quieter than where he had previously lived. The drifter was too demanding for quiet. He had had several run-ins with past neighbors about noise, but those neighbors and he managed to work out an agreement. Neither he nor his previous neighbors were mean, like in this scenario, so a compromise was possible. One neighbor, in particular, made a lot of noise, and the drifter often said, "Can you keep the noise down?" Then, one day, when the drifter was on his knees quietly weeding his vegetable garden, the neighbor snuck over and shouted over the fence, "Can you keep the noise down, neighbor?" They both laughed aloud at that!

A year passed, and one night, at about 8 pm, the drifter's neighbors began using an air compressor and a jackhammer to break up a concrete foundation. The noise startled the drifter, and the noise was deafening, and to be honest, the drifter was sick and tired of these two people. During a lull in the loud noise, the drifter shouted a question, "Can't this wait until tomorrow?" This time, the wife took over the argument and told the drifter to mind his own business and that they could make as much noise as they wanted until 10 pm. A nasty, expletive-filled argument

ensued, and finally, the drifter called the neighbor's wife a fucking bitch. At that point, the jackhammering stopped, and everyone went back inside.

The next day, the sheriff called the drifter and told him his neighbors had filed a complaint against him. The deputy reiterated that they had the right to make as much noise as they wanted until 10 pm. The drifter told him they did not have such a right. The sheriff and the drifter argued. The sheriff informed the drifter he could be cited for using profane language as that was a form of assault, and the drifter asked if he was being charged. When he was told no, the drifter hung up.

When things calmed down with his neighbors, the drifter tried to explain that he had a legal right to "quiet enjoyment" of his property. The drifter explained that if they didn't respect his right to the quiet enjoyment of his property, he would take them to court and sue them, where they would be forced to defend themselves at what would not be a small financial cost, but a cost that he could well afford.

That conversation and threat of being sued worked, and an uneasy peace prevailed. However, there were several more instances where vulgar language, middle fingers, and physical intimidation happened, but each time, the two men managed to reconcile. After all of these terrible arguments, the neighbor would come by and apologize, and often, he would say he had been angry because he had argued with his wife. The drifter said, "Hey. Don't take it out on me!" They would laugh and shake hands. The wife seemed to be drifting into her cocoon of non-forgiveness, bitterness, and grudge-holding. The drifter would have preferred calm waters, but even this was preferable to the ugly shouting matches.

There came several times when the neighbors would yell at him about politics, and the drifter would say, "I'm not political." His neighbors would call him names, saying the drifter was on the other side of their political spectrum, and they thought those names would annoy him, but he just laughed at them.

After nearly five years of being full-time neighbors, another incident arose where his neighbors started a burn pile, and the wind blew the smoke into his house again. The drifter went out and said, "Hey! The smoke is going into my house!" His neighbor stuck his middle finger in the air and shouted, "It's a burn day!"

During the day, the drifter coughed when he saw his neighbors, indicating the smoke was still bothering him, and, for the drifter, this was done with humor but also to let them know the smoke was still affecting him. He was smiling and honestly thinking they were taking it as being done in fun, too. Later that afternoon, the neighbor came over and said, "You'd better quit the coughing as my wife is furious about it." As this was being told, the wife joined the two men, and the drifter apologized to the woman, saying he had coughed in jest and it wasn't meant to annoy her. The woman then told the drifter she thought he was a real fucking asshole, and if he didn't quit the coughing, she was going to really tell him what she really thought of him.

The drifter was flabbergasted, and he walked away. Several days later, the neighbor man walked over to the drifter's house. The drifter told him he never wanted to talk to his wife again. The drifter also asked him why he didn't seem to care when his burn pile filled the drifter's house with smoke. The drifter tried to show him a document he had printed, which stated that even on Burn Days, if the wind blew smoke that annoyed anyone, the person responsible for the smoke could be cited. The drifter could see his neighbor's temper boiling, and then his neighbor exploded with more f-bombs and middle fingers. The drifter was furious, too. The situation



between them escalated. The drifter shouted to his neighbor to come back and fight, and when the neighbor kept walking but flipping him off, the drifter yelled that he was never to set foot on his property again.

After that, the drifter was entirely surprised by his feelings. The drifter sat with his feelings for two days and talked to a couple of his friends, and all the while, he was processing his emotions. He came to understand that it was only him that wanted a friendship with his neighbors. They didn't care either way. So, for twenty years, the drifter tried, and for twenty years, his neighbors didn't care. As the drifter began to question why he cared and why they didn't care, the drifter started to realize that for two-plus decades of living next to two people who both suffered from disorders that affected their mood, thinking, and behavior, one from drug use and the other from OCD, was something he was never going to be able to change. The drifter did not have the power to change or heal what was wrong with his neighbors.

As the drifter thought things over and remembered their experiences together over the past 20-plus years, he realized that his heart was not mean. He knew his heart was good and that his first reaction to anything was never to be mean. The drifter realized that he needed to quit trying to appease and to quit forgiving and to stop trying to be his neighbors' friend because his neighbors' hearts were mean, and it seemed, to the drifter at least, as if their hearts had gone bad.

The drifter repeated his diagnosis of his neighbors to a couple of his friends, and his friends concurred that he should stop trying to make this work. The "bad hearts" was difficult for the drifter to say out loud and for anyone to hear, as it was a damning diagnosis. And even though the drifter had not drifted much in two decades, and not at all in the past six years, he contemplated drifting again now. The drifter wanted calm waters, and as he sat, considering how he had been inviting his neighbors and enabling them not only to be mean but to be mean to him,

he realized he did not need to drift again. The drifter needed to stop enabling his neighbors, and if that meant not speaking to them again, so be it.

Finally, the drifter sat in his home or out in his yard, feeling a relief he had not felt in years. No longer was he responsible for his neighbor's moods or keeping a lid on their tempers. No, the drifter was only responsible for his moods and his temper. Yes, he knew there would be more incidents where their noise would bother him, but as long as it was between 8 am and 5:30 pm, he promised himself he would do his best to say or do nothing. And if their smoke bothered him, he would report them.

The drifter now knew that he had been the most significant part of this problem and that by extricating himself from the relationship, he would no longer be enabling the problem, and he could finally stop trying to control things he couldn't control.

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © July 1st, 2022