

## **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, who was 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 the reason her lungs were pink was because they were 100% healthy. The medical training doctor explained that his former student had only ever seen the x-rays of lungs of people who lived in the cities. This story was told to the drifter on the farthest, inhabited island off the northern coast of Scotland, by the woman's brother.

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, while marvelling at the stunning natural beauty and the ruggedness of the island surrounded by the North Sea, could only see a life of subsistence for him if he were to live on this remote island. The drifter wanted a lot more for himself than that.

Decades later the drifter arrived at a place in the mountains and in a forest, in northern California. This was 30 years and 25 countries later from his times on the 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. Their attitude, as interpreted

by the drifter, was similar to his attitude, and that 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 as a way of informing them he came in peace.

The drifter would find out there were many people here born to families who had lived here for generations. Most of the work available here had been working in the vast forests or the lumber mills, and that work employed a large percentage of the population. But as times changed so too did the life of the people here change also. City people came and protested about the number of trees being harvested, about the of 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 physically protest, but also by driving metal stakes into the trees which resulted in injury to many workers, and costly repairs to the lumber mill equipment. Tempers flared, and a lot of hatred was infused into the hearts of those on both sides. Finally, the protesters won the day and life changed for the mountain people. Many 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 of influence, but then the bitterness and hate was also shared 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, while never being personally involved on either side of that fight, was told about the bitterness that still lingered. He learned quickly about the people he met; because for a drifter that initial information he gleaned became the barometer and the compass he used to see if he

should stay or if he should 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 threat he felt, and this was 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 of the things that most people care about, and in fact he didn't mind if you left him entirely alone. The drifter liked to say hi, and maybe indulge in a little small talk, and then he liked to go his way. But on a few occasions the conversation turned to topics he really tried to steer clear of. Topics like the news, politics, religion, race, and sexuality. The just-under-the-surface anger and hate often released during these conversations was enough to convince the drifter not to engage with either the people who insisted on talking about such things, or to engage 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, and some of those people he even felt a small friendship had formed. The reason the group was small was because the drifter felt many people living 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 of them didn't care they were mean. It seemed to the drifter that some were even proud of how mean they were and proud of how mean they could be. In some ways it was scary even. The drifter was a loner, but even loners like a little friendship. He made the acquaintance of his nearest neighbors and they were very hostile people. Of course, the drifter could be hostile too if the occasion warranted hostility, but this drifter, like most drifters, preferred peace over

aggression. The drifter would often repeat to people that he preferred calm waters, meaning he wanted calm conversations rather than hostile conversations.

One day his neighbors lit a fire on their property to burn pine needles that they had raked. The wind blew the smoke onto his property and the smoke 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 allowed anyone permission 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 wife of the neighbor began putting the fire out with her garden hose, and once the smoke had abated the drifter went into his house.

Next time his neighbor saw him he apologized but the drifter told him it was going to take a while for him 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 fulltime. He had visited often, usually for a week each and every month for a decade and a half. He loved fishing and hiking the mountains, but once he was done working in the city, he had sold everything and finally moved. His neighbors had done nearly the same thing, and had only recently moved there fulltime as well.

A seemingly benign question from the drifter about a truck that was being stored on their property ended in his neighbor going from friendly to aggressive in an instant. More f-you’s were exchanged, more physical intimidation was tried by his neighbor, and again, 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 a good heart, 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 demeanour 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 again brought him to a stage where physical confrontation was not off the table. The drifter had been in many fist fights, too many really, but his demeanour had also stopped many other fights.

There are a lot of men who have never been in a fist fight, and when the drifter found this out, he was shocked, because for the drifter fighting had been the natural progression of events in many of his confrontations.

As time went on 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 his wife wasn't capable of sitting 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 literally swept the dirt in her backyard for several hours.

There's a saying the drifter had learned that said that a life without deep meaning will 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 life and whether she had deep meaning or not, but he did care about the incessant noise her OCD generated.

After a fishing trip the drifter cleaned the several fish and he put the guts, carcasses, and skin out in a pile for the critters to scavenge. Apparently, a piece of skin got dropped in 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, "F 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, "F 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 again.

The drifter despised unnecessary noise. He was quite prone to being bothered by excessive noise of any kind and at any time. The drifter had moved here because here it was generally much quieter than where he had lived previously. The drifter was probably 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 compromise was possible. One neighbor in particular made a lot of noise, and the drifter would often say, "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?" They both laughed aloud at that!

A year went by and one night about 8pm the drifter's neighbors began using an air compressor and a jack hammer 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 excessive 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 10pm. A nasty, expletive filled argument ensued, and finally the drifter called the neighbor's wife a f'ing bitch. At that point the jack hammering stopped and everyone went back inside.

The next day the sheriff called the drifter and told him his neighbors had lodged a complaint against him. The deputy reiterated that they had the right to make as much noise as they wanted until 10pm at night. The drifter told him they did not have such a right. The sheriff and the drifter argued. The sheriff told 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 what was called "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 sue them and take them to court, 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 seemed to work and an uneasy peace prevailed, though there were several more instances where vulgar language, middle fingers, and physical intimidation happened, but each time the two men managed to reconcile. After most of these terrible arguments the neighbor would come by, apologise, and often he would say he had had an argument with his wife. The drifter said, "Hey. Don't take it out on me!" and they would laugh and shake hands. The wife however seemed to be drifting into her own 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.

Now nearly five years of them being fulltime neighbors, another incident arose where his neighbors started a burn pile and the wind again blew the smoke into his house. 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 back, “It’s a burn day!”

During the day the drifter coughed when he saw his neighbors, indicating the smoke was still bothering him, and to the drifter this was done with humor but also to let them know the smoke was still affecting him. He was smiling and he honestly thought 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 really angry about it.” As this was being said 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 f’ing a’hole, and if he didn’t quit the coughing, she was going to really tell him what she 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 caused an annoyance to anyone the person responsible for the smoke could be cited. The drifter could see his neighbor simmering 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 that he was never to set foot onto his property again.

After that the drifter was quite surprised by his feelings. The drifter sat with his feelings for two days, he talked to a couple of his friends, but really, he was processing his feelings. He came to understand that it was only him that wanted a friendship with his neighbor's. They didn't care either way. So, for twenty years the drifter tried and for the twenty years his neighbors didn't care. As the drifter began to question why he cared and why they didn't care, the drifter began 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 as he remembered their experiences together over the past 20 plus years, he realised that his heart was not mean. He knew his heart was a good heart, and he knew that his first reaction to anything was never to be mean. The drifter realised that he needed to quit trying to appease and to quit forgiving, and to stop trying to be his neighbours' friend, because his neighbors' hearts were mean hearts, and it seemed, to the drifter at least, as if their hearts had simply 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 it was difficult for anyone to hear, as it was quite a damning diagnosis. And even though the drifter had not drifted much in two decades, and not at all in the past 6 years, he contemplated drifting again now. The drifter wanted calm waters, and as he sat contemplating how he had been inviting his neighbours, and even enabling his neighbours, not

only to be mean but to be mean to him, he realized he did not need to drift again. The drifter simply 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, and he felt a relief he had not felt in years. No longer was he responsible for his neighbor's moods or for keeping a lid on their tempers. No, the drifter was only responsible for his moods and his temper. Yes, he knew there were going to be more incidents where their noise would bother him but as long as it was between 8am and 5:30pm he promised himself he would do his very best to say or do nothing. And if their smoke bothered him, he would report them.

The drifter now knew that he himself had been the biggest 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