

Why I Live Where I Live

The place where I live is 2,000 miles from where I was born, 4,000 miles from where my heart lives, and worlds away from the cultures of both of these other places; and yet I am quite happy here. I have made this place my home as much as it has made me its homesteader. In the way that most of life is contradictory, I feel that I *fit* here, though I know that in most ways I certainly do not. For I am nothing like any of my immediate neighbors or the people down the road; the people from this region of the country regard me as an oddity. They've heard of people like me, but they never thought that they'd actually meet one. Now that they have, they still consider me an oddity, but they accept me; they've decided that I'm all right. That I've been accepted by those who claim without question this country as their own is a part of why I fit here, but only a small part.

I knew before I ever saw or set foot on these thirty acres, that I would make this my home. I had been looking for property in the Ozarks for nearly two years and was not having much luck, either in selling my place in Nevada or in finding something suitable and affordable here. It was winter, and none of the real estate agents that were looking for property for me had anything to show me, but something told me to book a flight anyway, make the trip, and I'd find my new home. I had long since learned to trust feelings before reason, so I made the necessary arrangements. The flight was only three weeks away, but I was convinced that the place I'd be buying would come on the market before then. I made calls to new agents and arranged to view properties I was sure wouldn't be what I was looking for, just in case the sense of destiny I felt was actually desperation, combined with stubbornness and wishful thinking. But I needn't have bothered, because one week before my trip, my favorite real estate agent called me to tell me about *this* place, which had just been listed. I knew as she described this small old farmhouse, with its three outbuildings for my animals, and the many fruit trees, pastures, woods, and pond to me that it was "the one." My long search had come to an end. I could hardly wait to see it.

When I first read of the deals to be had on property in the Ozarks I was at once intrigued and skeptical. I'd heard that it was green and beautiful, but what about the people? Just the word "Ozarks" was enough to unleash a series of incest and hunting jokes, especially among my animal rights buddies. I was warned against trying to settle here. "They'll burn down your house if you post "no hunting" signs" I was told. Well, maybe they would, but how was that so different from what I'd already experienced in Nevada? Because of my fame/notoriety as an outspoken animal rights activist I'd had several threats against my well being and even my life from ranchers and the man who owned and operated the local slaughterhouse. An old sheep rancher had actually grabbed me and shaken me as I walked past him when I was working in a local casino, screeching at me "You better watch out what you put in that paper. You better watch out what you say or you'll get hurt one of these days. You better watch out..." all because I had written

a letter to the editor regarding the benefits of vegetarianism. I took his assault as an indication that the letter was well written, but in truth his attack shook me up.

And then there was bright red, overgrown, four by four king cab truck with the tinted windows and the license plate “NV BEEF” that actually tried to run me off the road and over a steep embankment. Certain death waited patiently a hundred feet or more below. I wonder what they would have done had they known that part of the precious cargo I carried that day was a hamburger-loving six-year-old child, and her mother?

The cops were no use either. Regarding the death and injury threats they responded with the usual “Well, unless they actually *do something* we can’t do anything about it. Be sure to let us know if someone beats you up or kills you.” When I reported the red truck and it’s personalized plate I was told that unless I could identify the driver, they couldn’t do anything. “How could I possibly identify the driver through black tinted windows?” I asked. “Well, you couldn’t--it wouldn’t stand up in court.” was the reply. So much for liberty and justice for all, I thought.

There were other incidents as well; like the repeated egging of my house, the vandalizing of my car, and the deer tag left on a tree in my front yard where I’d be sure to find it. And find it I did. Unfortunately for the proud killer, I not only knew all the game regulations, but I also had a good rapport with the area game warden. The tag was supposed to stay with the corpse, not wind up on a tree in the yard of the animal rights nut up the street. Because he was a Marine I also called his Commanding Officer and reported the incident, stating that I would not tolerate any further harassment. It wasn’t long before I received an apologetic phone call from Lt. Semper Fi (fee foe fum, lookout peacetime, here we come.) “You’re good.” he told me. “You got me.”

Another time I went out to my car to discover a huge bloody hunk of frozen dead deer in the driver’s seat. I guess the plan was for it to thaw out during the night, leaving a gory mess for me to find in the morning. Luckily for me, we got hit with a sudden and wicked freeze that night, and it remained more solid than any freezer could have kept it, and never left a mark on my seat. It did leave a mark on my heart; however--it got to me much more than a ruined seat ever could have. I cried bitter tears as I carried it to my garbage can and dropped it in. When I was done blubbing I started thinking, so I went out to the can, retrieved it, put it in the two-gallon soup pot I seldom used and cooked the stinking thing all day long. It must have weighed at least fifteen pounds, and it fed the five dogs I had at the time, as well as my six cats, for a full week. I also used it to bait the feral cats I was trapping, proving the lemons to lemonade theory. Still, these incidents troubled me, and I began to think again of my old dream of living on a farm in the hills somewhere, where the grass would grow green and stay that way for more than just a month of the year. It was a dream I’d had since childhood, but had put away while I was raising my two boys. I started to believe that it was time to dig up that dream

again, dust it off, and see if I could find that place I'd dreamt about so many times. And then I began to receive Ozark real estate brochures in the mail.

The information was tantalizing to me; it called my name, beckoning me to come and have a look for myself. I knew if I were ever going to have a farm, it wouldn't be in Ireland, my true home, and neither would it be in Nevada or anywhere in the Western U.S., where the prices were far out of my reach. I felt that the Ozarks were probably my only hope, and the sooner I went there, the better. I landed in Kansas City and headed south on interstate 71. It wasn't until I got outside of Springfield and saw the rolling lush green countryside unfolding in every direction that my heart started pounding and I knew that this was where I'd begin my search. The geography reminded me enough of Ireland's interior to make me know that I could be happy in these hills.

It wasn't Ireland, of course. But it bore enough of a resemblance for me to fall in love with it, much like a woman who can only be attracted to men who remind her of a lost love. My love for and attachment to Ireland and her people can only be explained on a spiritual level, for I was not born there, at least not in this lifetime. That I've lived there twice and left when I wanted to stay is a regret that I'll carry with me till the day I die. But life is not so easy to live, and mistakes are made to teach us the lessons our souls need to know. I learned that to follow only logic is folly; it's safer to listen to the heart, for the heart knows more than the head can comprehend. It's not logical, but this land's resemblance to Ireland is probably the largest part of why I live here in these hills of green. Why I live on the specific piece of land that I do is also spiritual in nature: I'm meant to. It's my destiny to give my energy to this place and blend it with that of the original owners and maybe even to the people who lived long before them-- the people who knew better than to believe in ownership of land, who knew this place and loved it in much the same way I do.

Shortly after I moved in to this old farmhouse, with its lovely sloping thirty acres surrounding it, I learned that this was once a famous peach orchard. People came from miles around to buy peaches at Sullivan's Orchard, because they were simply the best. The house I live in is not the original home. That home sat up at the top of what I christened "Chigger Field" and overlooked the pond and it's surrounding woods. The woods that circle the pond are splendid in springtime, with flowering Dogwoods and Red Bud trees. The fragrance from the fifty plum trees in full bloom floats on the sweet breezes to intoxicate all those who inhale it. All but a few of the peach trees are gone now, but down below the house are two ancient Winesap apple trees that still produce the best eating and baking apples I've ever come across. These trees are quite a distance from where the first house once was. The Sullivan's must have planted them after they moved away from the sorrow of the house that overlooked the pond.

One of their children drowned in the pond, a little girl who was just two. The kitchen window probably overlooked the pond, and I can imagine Mrs. Sullivan standing at the sink with her hands in the warm soapy water, tears running down her cheeks as

many times a day that the dishes had to be done. I heard they moved because she couldn't stand to look out the window and see the place where her baby had died. I don't know if it was in the kitchen, but that's where I see her, and understand her tears and her desire not to want to look too much at that spot. I didn't know any of this before I moved here, just as I didn't know then that I too would come to lose a child, and share that sorrow with Mrs. Sullivan. I doubt if knowing of the drowning would have changed my mind or heart about this place. A murder might have, but I never sensed anything of the chaos a murder would have left in its wake when I walked onto this land. The child's death is one more of the many things that make me feel that I belong here and am welcome here, both by the land itself and by those who lived here before me. I don't know if any of these intangibles qualify for a reason why I live here or not. But I do know that these intangibles have guided my decisions through every part of the process of finding the right place to live. My happiness in spite of sorrow here reminds me again of how contradictory life can be.

