

James Habeeb

## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Thoreau

I am a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Thoreau [or as close to Thoreau as someone can be these days].

I had just stormed out of my Astronomy class, pissed off for feeling that that my professor was shoving his own views of life and religion (or lack thereof) into my throat. I lit up a cigarette. Smoking had been my friend much more often than before. I started walking back home. Too much work to do for this class, and it didn't even help me get my English degree; it was just a gen-ed. It's funny how the classes that don't count towards your major usually require more work than ones that do. My entire college career can be summed up in a book I found at Penn State's bookstore, "I'm an English Major...Now What?" I had absolutely no clue what I was going to do with my life. It didn't help that everybody was breathing down my neck to finally make a decision on a career before the upcoming internship fair. It wasn't fair that I had this deadline to decide what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

I needed to get away from the pressure of college and family. Too many bullshit classes that didn't make a difference when I finally got a job, if I did get a job. What's the use of learning Astronomy when I want to work in a publishing house, anyway? It's just a way for the college to milk more money out of you; they want you to spend extra time taking classes that don't help in order for you to pay extra tuition. Damned bureaucrats, since when did college become a business? I was sick of it; I wanted no part in it anymore. I can imagine asking my advisor what the use of gen-eds was.

*"Well, this is to make your education better rounded," my advisor would say.*

*"Bull. I learn more from an issue of popular science than I do from a science class," I'd retort and storm out of his office. (I always have a flair for drama when I mentally enact scenarios).*

I walked to my apartment, which I shared with a guy I had nothing more in common than someone off the street. It's true. He was 6'5" and 350 pounds; I'm 5'5" and 130 pounds. He was from the ghetto part of D.C.; I'm from Suburbia. He was straight.

As I entered my room I had to step over the piles of dirty clothes strewn across my side of the room. I didn't care about laundry anymore; I had plenty of clothes to last me until Spring Break. I dropped my backpack on a chair and lay back on my bed. My room looked more like the inside of a mental health unit at a hospital than a bedroom. It didn't matter to me. I didn't really pay attention to details anymore; I didn't have the attention span. The walls were bare, the only decoration a postcard of Henry David Thoreau's log cabin in January. The man was great. He didn't like the way his life was going so he said "Fuck it," and decided to go off and do his own thing. His whole philosophy was to simplify. That's why I ended up in Jersey, to simplify my life. Too bad the reasons for leaving were not so simple.

I just broke up with my girlfriend of six years. I finally told her I was gay. I had been unhappy in the relationship for a while and I just decided that it was time for me to come out of the closet. Looking back however, I didn't "Come out" so much as "Leap out" like there was a 12-foot alligator hiding in that closet. It was no use dragging her along when I clearly wasn't the man she would marry. She suffered the obligatory crying spell, but the weird part is that she didn't hate me. I couldn't understand it. I mean, I hated myself for causing this enough for the both of us. She even had the nerve to blame herself for not knowing earlier. So, not only did I have the guilt of putting her through this whole ordeal but now I felt guilty about her blaming herself.

I wanted to thank her:

*Thanks. Thanks for the added guilt; I could always use some more. Next time, though, can you make the pain hit all at once? You could shoot me in the kneecap. That'd be better than this (I told you I had a flair for drama).*

I didn't want to hurt her, but goddamn it I couldn't lie to myself anymore. I was always trying to think that maybe I'd just grow out of it. Throughout my adolescence I was always trying to hide my "gay tendencies," like checking out the football star's nicely-shaped ass in the gym room. Eventually, though, I realized that I was just trying to seem normal for friends and family. I wanted nothing more than to form my own goddamn sense of identity and maybe even make a few gay friends of my own.

It wasn't easy for me. I didn't seem to fit in to the "cliques" on campus. If you couldn't quote the whole script of *Les Miserables* for one group; wear tight-ass jeans and banana-hammocks for another group; and listen to only to trance for a third; you had a better chance of winning the lottery than hanging out with them.

My parents don't know I'm gay; they can never know. There is no doubt in my mind that I would be disowned. They said, "It's a sin" and "all faggots go to hell." That's why I love my family...they're **so** accepting. But I love more is the fact that my parents swear like sailors and commit all these other "sins" themselves, but can't **handle** gay people. They're just hypocrites. Sometimes the rebellious teenager in me wanted to wear a rainbow shirt and sing Diana Somers to let them know that their only son was gay.

*Yeah, like at a family barbeque or something. I can just come out in a see-through shirt and leather pants. Knowing my parents, though, they wouldn't get it. They'd just ask me if I was on drugs.*

A vacation was definitely in order. I decided to just drive somewhere far away with no distractions. I told my parents that I was going on a weekend retreat with some campus writing group where there would be no reception. I didn't bother telling my friends. They would be too busy getting trashed to notice I was gone.

I skipped classes this morning and hopped into my Honda Civic and headed East. Six hours, a tank of gas, a pack of cigarettes, and countless repeats of Bon Jovi later (yes, Bon Jovi. I am a bad homosexual, I'm aware), I was in Jersey.

The beach in March is not the most populated place. That's why I chose it. South Jersey really only lived during the summer months. There were only a few here, the rest locals. I parked my car in one of the 24-hour lots and grabbed my duffel bag. I walked around the boardwalk for a while, just observing. Most of the shops were closed, with chain-link gates barring entry. I spotted a sign in front of a restaurant that said in neon: "Gone Somewhere Warmer! You Should Be There Too!" Why would I do that when I just wanted to be alone? How dare those people assume that people always want to travel in packs.

I sat on a bench in the boardwalk and opened my duffel bag. My knee kept trembling, like it was a bobble-head on ecstasy. I took out my copy of Thoreau's "*Walden*" to read and try and calm my nerves. I just read a random chapter. I have read that book so many times that every page was dog-eared and many of them were falling out of the binding.

The sun was high in the sky and it was getting pretty warm for a late-March day. I decided to go down on the beach and take a swim. I set my duffel bag down on the beach and took off my shirt. I

forgot swim trunks, so I decided to go in my jeans. That water was so cold it could turn any of the Baldwin brothers sober. I dove underwater and arose, my entire body frozen. I got out of the water and set up my beach chair. Since it was almost sunset I decided to start a fire. I piled up some driftwood I had found and went at it. An hour and a full book of matches later, I had my fire.

As I sat back on my red and green patchwork chair, I felt the heat of the fire tingle my legs. The red and orange flames danced like two ballerinas on a dark stage. I lit a cigarette from the arm of one of the dancers. The smoke formed into billows of ashy clouds above and rose into the starry night. Maybe some of it will end up in outer space. That'd be cool. The smell of burning wood mixed with the odor of saltwater in my nostrils. The beach is the perfect place to be, I thought. I got out of my chair and silently waded into the water again. The sounds of the waves had this hypnotic effect; they crashed with such consistency that the sound turned into a background noise, a din where the listener could get lost in. The only light on its surface was the reflection of the full moon. I must've stayed like that for a half hour, just trying to will the calm to overtake me like it overtook the ocean. I wanted it to stop the constant onslaught of conflicting emotions and thoughts.

Granules of sand stuck to the bottoms of my feet as I walk back to the fire. The sky shone with bright stars. There were thousands of them; probably as many stars in the universe than grains of sand on this beach. There are probably tons of planets like Earth, with its own people. Yet why did I feel so alone? *It'd be cool to travel the Universe, I thought. I'd say "Beam me up, Scottie."*

*God, that Astronomy class had more an effect on me than I thought.*

I think that it's every young boy's dream at one point or another: to go to outer space. I was twenty and still wanted to go. Traveling distant galaxies would be far more interesting and fulfilling than any life I'd lead down here. Of course, you have to have perfect vision and fulfill all of these other requirements, so there is not a snowball's chance in hell I'd be able to do it.

I still hoped, though, to one day go into outer space; inner space is too lonely. That night was the night I planned on stopping the loneliness, one way or another. Either I would have this epiphany and start thinking about things in a new way, or I'd be gone by sunrise. I started to eat a Slim-Jim by the fire. I couldn't handle it anymore. It felt like not only is everyone on a different page than me; they were in an entirely different section of the library. A life spent alone is of no consequence in my opinion. My view is that interaction and relationships with other people is when one truly lives. So, by my standards, I was already dead for quite some time.

A short, fat dog waddled towards me; it was obviously looking for food. It licked my hand and I gave it the rest of my Slim Jim. It seemed I have made a new friend. The dog, which I have affectionately named Scotty, looked too cute and well groomed (not to mention fat) to be a stray. I should have taken him to the SPCA. I asked him if he has a family, but all he did was tilt his head as if I was asking him to find proof of life on Mars using astrophysics. Yeah, I know that I was talking to a strange dog that for all I know can be carrying rabies.

*Rabies...now that'd be a way to go. I imagined people at my funeral asking my mother how I died.*

*Oh, he befriended a rabid dog, she would say.*

*They would look at her and say, Well, that was stupid. He deserved it, and walk away.*

Scotty sat down, lying on top of my feet near the fire. I relaxed, too. I felt this strange calm for the first time in a while. It was a nice night out. Not too warm or cold. Perfect. Everything about this night has been perfect, actually. Every minute detail from the ocean's melodies to the beautiful sight I was enveloped in; even my new pal Scotty here. Everything was perfect.

Could it be this easy? All I had to do was try to surround myself with things I wanted as best I could? No, it couldn't be that simple. But yet...I did feel peace. I looked up and thought that maybe God is listening. I felt relieved, not so alone anymore. Even if it **was** only Scotty. Somehow, I felt a sense of belonging here, something that I had been missing for too long.

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On Monday, three days after arriving in Jersey, Nick found the answer he was looking for. After much thought on what to do, he got out of his chair and walked to the shore once again. This time he brought "Walden" with him. Scotty followed, barking madly at the waves that licked his paws. Nick took one last look at his worn book. It was his muse, his inspiration, for the longest time.

"Not anymore," he muttered, "I am not living my life through a book. I'm going to live my life myself, the way **I want**. And I don't need to separate myself from people like this. Nothing will ever change if I don't just deal with my baggage. Sorry Thoreau, but you have no use for me anymore."

He threw the book into the ocean as far as he could and turned away. Scooping Scotty up, he headed back to camp.

"Come on Scotty, let's go home." Nick never looked back

Within an hour he was back in his car, Scotty sleeping in his passenger seat.