

A Motley Crew Buys Kefir

Bulldog rode an inheritance, partly invested in a 4 wheel drive rig, west from Jersey City and brought Chip and Michael with him. The 4 wheel drive made it almost all the way across the nation, slid and tipped over on an icy road, then stayed, fondly remembered, in a junk yard, evidence of the time the Jersey City Trio rode briefly affluent.

I met the trio in the environmental organization a few people put together in Paradise, on the western slope of the Sierra Mountains in northern California, and we became friends.

Chip, tall, strong, and young, arrived in the Sierras ready to fight anyone over anything and to grab whatever came to hand, rock, shovel, anything, for the advantage in the fight. Some of us kept surrounding him and overpowering him. "You're going to injure or kill somebody. We don't do it like that here."

"You don't? We don't? You mean, don't grab a chunk of rebar? Don't grab a rock? Just use my fists?"

"Take it a step further. Don't use your fists. Don't fight."

It took a lot of talking, steady friendship, and the passage of months before Chip changed enough to intervene between flaring tempers. "That's enough. You guys cool down. Talk about it. Don't fight. How can we ask for peace in the world if we fight each other? Clean it out of your lives." By then, his Jersey City accent had faded. He sounded almost western.

Michael never lost his Jersey City accent. We told him, "If somebody leaves something untended, it doesn't mean they're through with it. It's different out here than it is in the city. Take the radio (or camera or shovel or jacket) back. You're with us, so you represent us. The way people see it, a member of the group steals, the whole group is guilty. We're trying to get people interested in balance. Stealing isn't balance. If you're with us, you don't fight. You don't steal."

It was difficult for Michael to leave all those obviously abandoned goods crying out for responsible ownership. He walked away empty handed but with friends he valued, who stuck by him.

Early on a spring day of sunshine, we wanted kefir, a cultured

milk product, similar to yogurt and available in the city down the mountain.

By then, most of the Jersey City inheritance was spent. I was the only one who owned a car, so Bulldog, Michael, Chip, and I climbed into my car, and I drove down the mountain into the Sacramento Valley. We looked the town over. We parked and walked. We drove again.

I thought Chip was experiencing some strange emotions, but I was driving, looking at the traffic, the green trees, the people, and I didn't pay much attention until he slammed the side of the car and yelled something antagonistic at people we drove past.

I drove into the shade of a tree and parked. "What was that about, Chip?"

"What's the matter with people? All day long, I'm friendly. I smile at them. I say, 'Hey, how's it going?' I wave at them when we drive by. Nobody says nothin. They look at the sidewalk. They don't even see me. What's the matter with them?"

I said, "You've been a long time on the mountain. You see a few people every day. You know them. They know you. You look at each other and smile, say hello. These people down here don't know you. They see hundreds, maybe thousands of people every day. They don't know most of them. Maybe they get so they can't look directly at people all the time. What if, every time they look, they see anger or maybe nothing, just blank? Either way, that tires people out, so they quit smiling. They quit looking at each other."

From the back seat, Michael said, "Yeah. You dumb turkey."

Bulldog said, "I'm driving down the highway. I see people throw trash out of their car. Should I throw trash out of my car, if I had a car?"

Michael said, "I hear about somebody stealing stuff, do I start stealing stuff again, you dumb turkey?"

Chip clawed at the back of the front seat. "What's this dumb turkey stuff? What's the matter with you?"

"Cause you still got to learn. If you're ready to fight with people who just haven't looked at you, you got a ways to go yet. You got to stop fighting with people who walk right up to you and call you a dumb turkey, that's why."

Bulldog said, "Did you forget the city already? Did you forget who you were in the city? When you grow up and get half straightened out, does everybody grow up and get half straightened

out?”

Michael said, “Don’t forget, you represent us when you’re with us. You jump down ready to fight, you could get those guys driving by ready to tangle all four of us, and three of us don’t want to tangle with anybody.”

Chip said, “Four of us. Four of us don’t want to tangle. Okay. I see it. I just never thought it through, because I’ve been for months with people who look right at me. Okay. Drive. I’ll keep working on it. It’s still a lot to work out. Pass the kefir. I promise I won’t get us into any tangles, and I’ll keep thinking about this until I get it worked out.”

I drove. The sun shone. It was a good day for kefir. It was a good day to work together toward harmony. Slowly maybe, but still toward harmony. It was a good day for spring beauty all around us to come to our senses and to soak into us.

Chip clicked the radio on and sang with the tune that came into the car. He looked at people in cars, people on the sidewalks. He didn’t wave at anybody. I think he concentrated his energy on understanding what people are about, on what he is about, on what communication is about. He absorbed himself in his thoughts, in the sunshine around us. We all rode quietly toward some unknown future, toward some unknown destination.