



In the PINES

By T. Lee Brown

Oregon is not a TV show

Last week, I promised to come back with more word-nerdery about the roots of words like “cakewalk” and “taking the cake.” Instead my attention was diverted to Portland, Oregon, just over the pass and up I-5 apiece, where I lived for some 20 years. When the President of the United States of America wants the public’s attention diverted — from plagues and pandemics, mischief and mayhem — he sure knows how to do it.

That’s what a reality TV guy brings to the Oval Office: the spectacle and outrageousness one expects from fake-real television shows. For those who believe the line that the protesters are “bussed in” from elsewhere, please adjust your reality goggles from “what someone on TV told me” to “actual reality.” Real live human beings in Portland, folks I know, tell me that they and their friends and neighbors—genuine Oregonians, true Portland citizens—are out there protesting.

Some are demonstrating on behalf of the Black Lives Matter movement. Some, like the Wall of Moms and their ancillaries, the leaf-blower dads, are deliberately creating a sea of protection between unwelcome federal paramilitaries and local protesters. Yep, seriously. Moms of toddlers are out there sucking tear gas to support the Bill of Rights for their fellow citizens.

Others are generally infuriated that their city has been invaded by the White House’s private army:

heavily armed “goons,” to quote a Sisters local who carries an American flag and a handmade sign on Cascade Avenue. These goons spray rubber bullets, send teargas into the streets, and leap from unmarked vans to kidnap innocent citizens—not just in the small area of Portland that sees regular intense protest action, but wherever the heck they feel like nabbing people.

According to a pretty darned convincing Facebook post, they surrounded an interpreter heading to work at the Multnomah County Courthouse. Six armed men intimidated and swore at Felipe Nystrom, a U.S. citizen with Costa Rican origins, asked for his ID, then refused to allow him to get his wallet.

At that moment, someone Nystrom had interpreted for in a grand jury case happened to walk by. The goons tried to wave that potential witness away — but whoops, it was a Deputy District Attorney.

“For doing nothing more than going to work while being a U.S. citizen but brown I was very close to being taken and the worst part is that I have no idea by who or where I would have been taken,” Nystrom posted.

Combined with the virus, at first glance my old town looks like a dystopic fantasy

movie about an authoritarian regime taking over the USA. The spectacle makes one wonder what, exactly, the TV producers are hoping we fail to notice elsewhere. Anything interesting out there?

Let’s see: the U.S. COVID death rate is awful; when confronted by a journalist on Fox News about it, the President lies. Attorney General William Barr gets U.S. attorney Geoffrey Berman fired for investigating the President’s pals (remarkably, Berman refuses to step down). Nothing to see here, folks! Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!

Those TV guys sure are good at focusing our attention, aren’t they? Impressive.

Too bad this isn’t a television show. It’s our country, our state, and our fellow citizens—including my smart, beautiful stepdaughter, whom I pray will not be shot in the head (even with “less lethal” munitions) for daring to walk down the street, peacefully exercising her First Amendment rights. That’s what happened to Donovan LaBella, described by a friend as “completely nonviolent,” someone who helps “de-escalate situations.”

No wonder they shot him. They’re not interested in de-escalating anything. The feds are in town to escalate. They’re in town to amp

up fear, intimidation, blood, conflict—all the stuff that makes American television so entertaining.

A few protesters look to be young people who want to light fires and make big noises. They’ve got something to prove, just as many of us did when we were 18 or 20. Maybe they, like their President, just really, really want attention. Maybe bluster and violence are the only tools these kids, like their President, know how to wield.

If you click past the dramatic front-page photos, things in Portland look downright sweet. Common people post their phone footage online. It shows the B-reel, the unspectacular video snippets that compose the bulk of our lives. These show the hard, dull work being done by enormous waves of everyday citizens, taking to the streets because care about their country, their city, their fellow citizens.

A White singer belts out

the national anthem on the Portland State University campus, harmonizing with a Black opera singer who walks by and asks to join in. Hundreds of moms in yellow and white T-shirts march along looking innocent and hopeful, if tired.

None of these people look like hyped-up extras in an apocalyptic sci-fi movie. They don’t look like celebrity contestants on “The Apprentice.” They certainly don’t look like the anarchists or America-haters the President claims to think they are.

They look like me and you. Everyday people. Oregonians. Americans.

What do they want? Freedom. Justice. The pursuit of happiness—not just for TV personalities, not just for White people, not just for rich people, but for everybody. And the federal government wants to shut them down with unconstitutional violence.

Doesn’t that take the cake?



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