

Let's See How You Like It

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Frank lived in a suburban area surrounded by farms. Every day he drove by a small blackberry patch on the outskirts of his neighborhood. Every July, a hand-written sign went up in the yard offering pick-them-yourself blackberries for sale.

For years, Frank drove by and never stopped.

Then, one fateful day, on a whim, Frank decided to pick some up as a surprise for his wife. He pulled into the gravel driveway and got out of his car into the warm northwest Indiana sunshine.

Frank spotted a guy in his forties sitting in a folding chair next to a barn. It was set off from the main house- about twenty yards from the entrance to the blackberry patch.

"You here to pick some berries?" He asked.

Nodding, Frank walked over to him. "My wife loves making pies, thought I'd surprise her."

"Well, the berries are good and ripe- they'll go great in a pie. Five bucks to fill up a basket."

The guy had a pile of baskets sitting next to his chair. He took one and handed it to Frank. He handed the guy five bucks in return and spent the next fifteen minutes filling his basket with berries.

When he finished, Frank came back towards the barn. The wicker basket the man gave him to fill was really nice- he thought he would ask for some plastic grocery bags for the berries so the man could keep it.

He was trying to be friendly.

Instead, he walked into the fuse that, once lit, changed his life.

The guy wasn't out in the open- he was in the barn talking to someone, presumably on the phone. Frank walked around to where the door was and the guy's words came to his ears.

"... can you expect from a bunch of goddamn animals? You know that's all they are. That fucker Obama and his porch monkeys from Chicago..."

The guy saw Frank in his peripheral vision. As soon as he did, he stopped talking in mid-sentence. Frank heard the bile the man was spewing, but it came as no surprise considering the central item hanging from the barn rafters.

It was a confederate rebel flag. Frank had always thought of it as the racist's secret handshake.

Indiana racists hang confederate rebel flags in barns as commonly as Catholics hang pictures of the Pope. Frank felt his stomach drop.

"Fuck," he muttered, "I gave this asshole five bucks for some racist blackberries."

Frank found himself with a dilemma. His parent's raised him to speak up against this sort of thing. He'd been taught to speak up. *He had a responsibility not to walk away.* He realized it wasn't going to do any good, but he couldn't just stay silent.

"Dude, what's with the stupid flag?" Frank asked- his voice flat.

"It's my heritage." The guy replied, the fake smile he wore dropping from his face.

His entire demeanor changed. Gone was the typical 'ah shucks' friendly, so many people in the Midwest adopt. Frank caught a glimpse of the creature beneath the veneer.

"Your heritage?" Frank scoffed, "Did your great-grandparents own slaves or something? Is that the heritage you're memorializing up there?" Frank asked, being a dick on purpose.

"You can get out of my barn now before I decide you're threatening me and put a few shotgun shells in your guts."

"I don't want your racist berries. Give me my five bucks back."

"I ain't giving you shit. Get out of my barn."

Frank thought a moment about pushing the point that he wanted his money back, but he decided he might be wrong from a legal standpoint- since he'd already picked the berries. Plus, he wasn't particularly interested in getting shot by a redneck. Instead of arguing any further, he just sat the basket down, got into his car and drove away.

He left, but the incident sat with him, like a bad clam.

That night, he was watching TV. While flipping through the channels he came across a documentary on the Klan- on the lynchings and the cross-burnings- the true legacy of the flag hanging in that racist fucker's barn. Frank started to wonder if the dude would be so quick to embrace 'his heritage' if he understood what it really meant.

Someone, Frank thought, should give that bastard a taste of his own medicine.

See how he liked it.

Frank wasn't stupid. He didn't act impulsively. A month passed before he made his move.

The evolution of the headline on the local newspaper's web page demonstrates how the story unfolded.

The initial headline was blunt and appropriately frightening: **Overnight Cross Burning**

Within ten minutes, that headline had turned into: **Overnight Cross Burning on White Family's Lawn**

All the reporters had to do was run the guy's name through the police database and they discovered the 'victim,' Mr. Merle Foggy, had been arrested on several occasions over the previous two decades in connection with running guns and drugs to the Klan. That changed the headline to:

Overnight Cross Burning Victim Has Klan Ties

At that point, the reporters (and the police) were figuring it was the Klan who did the burning as some sort of warning. From the tone of the accompanying article, Frank realized this was the case. So he sat down and wrote a letter, dropping it by hand into the newspaper office's mail box.

When the reporter and editor read it, the headline changed to: **Cross Burnings for Tolerance?**

That was when the story went viral.

Frank wasn't finished. Merle Foggy was just the spark that lit the fuse. Prior to acting at Merle's house, Frank took a lot of vacation time from work. It was July- there were a lot of open garages. Frank set out in a different direction every day and just drove around. As he wandered, Frank wrote down the addresses of houses with rebel flags hanging prominently in the garage.

Once he acted, Frank knew a lot of people would take down their flags- realizing that keeping them up was dangerous. He continued driving around until he had a list of twenty-five targets. He figured that would be enough to prove his point.

He bought all of the lumber for the crosses at once and rented a storage container to keep it in so his wife wouldn't know what he was doing.

Frank was in the process of his twenty-second cross-burning when the police swarmed in and arrested him.

The question the people from the press ask Frank is always the same: What were you trying to accomplish by burning crosses on the lawns of people you think are racists?

Frank always answered the same way. It was a statement he'd written down and worked on for a while, *before* he burned the cross on Merle Foggy's lawn.

He said, "Well, I meant it mostly as a protest. A protest against staying silent. A protest against letting this sort of thing go on. It's wrong racists never have to face the consequences of their bigotry, but the rest of us have to deal with them. They hurt people all the time. I didn't actually hurt anyone- I just scared the shit out of some racists. I was very careful. I soaked down the lawns with water and I only went out on calm nights so the fire wouldn't spread. I took these precautions because in addition to a protest, my actions were also meant as absurdist political theatre. It was a publicity stunt for tolerance. A demand to be accepting of difference or face dire consequences. I don't see why they get to constantly threaten *our* lives and we have to just turn the other cheek. Christianity is their thing, not mine. What I did might be right- it might be wrong. I know my conscience is clear. The court will decide and I will accept the verdict. But, maybe I've seen too many Batman movies, but I thought of what I did as fighting back against oppression. Yes, I'm aware of the irony of what I'm saying. I don't care. Cross-Burnings for Tolerance!"

Opinions about Frank and what he did varied wildly, but it was undeniable, his race played a role in what people thought. One thing was obvious: society, as a whole, still had some growing to do.