



## Cousin Ernie

*Mike Stewart*

A few months into the pandemic, my family was concerned about my cousin Ernie. My uncle told my mom and dad that Ernie was still living in a remote area of northern Arkansas that can attract people with strange ideas, if you know what I mean. Cousin Ernie and I grew up together in the Ozarks. After high school, Ernie stayed in Northern Arkansas. He worked at the boat docks on the lake during the summer and plowed snow from the roads during the winter while I went on to college and then to law school. I got married and got a job at a law firm in Little Rock.

Ernie lived in a rural cabin in the hills. There was a large barn and workshop for do-it-yourself kinds of guys. It's a scenic piece of property in an area that our families had camped and fished at for years. After his dad moved to a nursing home in Florida and my parents moved to a retirement community in Little Rock, I hadn't visited or contacted Ernie in three, no, it's four years. I wish I had a better excuse. You get busy with careers, spouses, kids, school, vacations, and you lose track of people. You lose people.

The one time I visited Ernie at his cabin, he was filling his barn with supplies such as tools, camping gear, canned goods, bottled water, whiskey, but not weapons. Ernie was not a violent guy. At least not back then. He droned on and on about his plans. He talked about being self-sufficient and being prepared. All I really remember was the cabin had a pit toilet which was the tipping point for me as far as visiting him. His email and text connectivity were spotty and unreliable up in the mountains, so I used that as another excuse for not keeping in touch. I wasn't familiar with the term at the time but I learned later that Ernie was a "prepper." People that prepare themselves by stocking up on supplies for events like the apocalypse or whatever it is we are going through now.

I felt a little guilty for losing contact with my cousin. Particularly with the pandemic and all. I sheepishly called my cousin's cell number. The call went directly to voicemail for a survivalist group or something, so I quickly hung up. I checked with my parents, and they confirmed the number with my uncle. I did an online search on Ernie and came up empty. I was getting a little concerned. My wife wanted me to have the police do a welfare check, but since my cousin was a prepper, I thought a misunderstanding might occur if police showed up on his property.

I could juggle my work schedule to allow me to make the three-hour trip. I knew the old county road off the highway leading up to the cabin. I had to park my SUV and

walk the last few hundred yards. There was a faded sign on a wood post that said, “No Trespassing,” but as a lawyer I ignored it and continued up the hill. I entered the tree line and two men dressed in camouflage gear stepped from behind some trees. I stopped. One of the men lowered the balaclava partially covering his face and said, “This is private property. You need to leave.” The other man placed his hand on the holster on his hip.

This confirmed what I feared. My cousin had become part of a cult or something worse, but I needed to know about my cousin. I said, “I’m here to see my cousin Ernie.”

The man with his hand on his holster must have had a cell phone or radio earpiece. “Hold on. He wants this guy up at the cabin,” he said.

“Roger that. Let’s go,” he said to me.

I hesitated for a moment. I considered leaving and calling the cops. But what would I say? I was trespassing and I think my cousin is in a cult?

At the top, I noticed fake trees that were antennas with solar panels. I looked down the other side of the mountain and there was a paved road, several buildings, trucks and a parking lot. I saw people scurrying between buildings. The cabin still looked the same on the outside but as I was led inside, it was totally different. The interior looked as if John Wayne and Bill Gates had decorated the place. There were paintings of western scenes on the wall and plush leather chairs around the room. The two men stopped in front of a large desk. On the desk there were laptops, tablets, large displays, and all kinds of devices.

A few seconds later, I heard a loud flushing sound. A door opened and my cousin Ernie walked out of a bathroom. He placed a mask on his face.

“Bobby? What are you doing here?” His muffled voice said.

“I came to check on you,” I stepped toward him.

“Sorry dude, no hugs. You need a mask,” my cousin tells me.

“Sorry about that,” I replied as I pulled my cloth mask from my pocket. “Got a little flustered.”

“Is it the security guys? We don’t get much crime up here. A few hunters and hikers wander up the undeveloped side. I should put up a fence but I don’t want to ruin the view,” Ernie said.

“I haven’t heard from you.”

“I talk and visit with dad. I guess things get muddled when he talks about me. He has Alzheimer’s.”

“I didn’t know. He told us you were up here alone.”

“I have fifty-one employees on the mountain. I started this supply company out of my barn. Business took off and really picked up with the pandemic.”

“I can see that. You should have kept in touch,” I admonished him.

“I got busy living my life. You know?” he replied.

