

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen



Boreal Bushcraft

Living in the wild from the wild

novel

What if you disconnect from society altogether?

Urban nomads know what that's like, but they continue to live in the city in frayed corners and live on a kind of hand-outs and what others throw away.

In countries with lots of nature and few inhabitants per square kilometer, some daredevils disconnect completely. They make a place where they live and live entirely self-sufficiently. Bushcraft is called that, the skill of living in the wild from the wild. They do have some trade with the "inhabited world" for tools, gasoline, solar panels, clothes, batteries and lights.

In this narrative, we follow a man as he disconnects from society in a natural area. We live with him as he makes decisions, builds cabins and boats, bakes pots and hauls firewood endlessly.

Until uninvited people come to his door asking: can I too?

For children, he kneels down.

This is idyllic for a while, but more damaged children arrive.

Does he know how to hold his own as a maverick eccentric?

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Colofon

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen, *Boreal Bushcraft*

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1. The right place, or not?

He had to filter the water.

The gray-bearded man had scooped, tasted and spit out a handful of the slow-flowing water. It was undrinkable.

He rose from his crouched position and scanned around again, hesitant about the location because the water did not appear to be potable. On what basis could he make the right decision? What was right, for a start? At sea there had never been a question of choice, there it was a question of moving on a medium in perpetual motion. Only the direction had to be decided. This landscape however had solidified into a fixed form, which he had to make do with, where he had to stop moving from one place to another, somewhere. Like his last ship, which had sailed without him to the place where it would be scrapped. Here he was dealing with a landscape which possibilities and difficulties he had to fathom, whether he could live in it and from it.

Again the grotesque of his expedition crept up on him. He who had no experience of land life would show how a modern man could live in the wild. But yes, that had to do with his insatiable craving for autonomy since he had given up his last ship. There he had been skipper alongside God. He wanted that again.

He dropped his reservations; they stemmed mostly from inexperience, he hoped. Just looking around in the clear winter air, searching for what he needed, for those things he had thought of, looked up and mentally noted down long beforehand.

Again. Why was this place suitable? It was higher ground with forest, a natural meadow that indicated the presence of large grazers, deer for sure, maybe feral ponies, and feral cattle. That called for sturdy fencing. The stream with tall alders, ash, hazel and willow along the bank and reed beds on the other side should be a great resource.

The rational planning skills he clung to, that he prided himself on, would not last another day against the crippling doubts that would utterly flatten him if he gave in to them. Like: what was

he doing? What was he trying to prove? Philip, he admonished to himself, whom are you kidding?

He did have an answer to that last question: he did it for himself. There was no one else in his life.

Why? It was the ultimate question with which any child can strike adults dumb. But he did have a vague idea for an answer: because, as a retired sailor, he couldn't stand living in a neatly raked world.

Underneath that other questions loomed, even more existential. At sea he had been the supreme chief, of the ship and the crew - at least: as long as he carried out the shipping company's instructions. On shore, none of that had remained. No first mate to have philosophical conversations with, nor the private group of officers to eat with. Actually, there was no one to eat with, which did feel shabby. No more cook. No one to talk to while his head was so full.

'Okay,' he cried aloud to the grass, river and trees - to the sky he dared not - 'I'm here to save myself from a deadly maladjustment!'

Gee, what a lofty motive, he answered himself.

Saving someone is always a good thing to do, he managed to overrule himself.

Let's see then if he could.

Doubt. Was this really the best place? Why does a place have to be the best, is good not enough? And how do you define "best"?

He decided to walk on, surely there were other places that were suitable and perhaps more suitable than this one. For example, with a stream or spring that provided potable water.

Although he had studied all kinds of techniques and handicrafts, he had never made anything himself. Now he had to start with a water filter. Sand with a layer of activated carbon underneath. For that, among other things, he had taken a pottery course. For a water filter he would have to start baking pots he could stack.

The small river ran under a wooded ridge of high hills. Where the valley floor was somewhat flat, pastures had been able to develop thanks to large grazers, mainly horses he believed from

droppings. Ponies, the droppings were quite small. The slopes were heavily wooded and reached down to the stream here and there. Across were vast reed beds with tufts of alders here and there. Farther away the land rose again with fields, meadows, groves and a sparse farm, he could conclude thanks to his binoculars.

A steep cliff had forced the stream outward into a bend and cut off its onward path.

He took off his backpack and ate sandwiches he had brought with him. He had no stream or spring seen along the way. The water from the hills would sink underground to the stream and the swamp behind it. So he used the water he brought with him sparingly.

Then surely the first place he had examined was the most suited, although drinking water was missing.

He undertook the journey back. Upon returning to the meadow, the feeling grew that this was the only place he would get out.

He walked from the marshy bank up the gentle slope, pulling loose a clump of grass or plant here and there. Clay, dark soil, must be good for a vegetable garden. Hear him out: he hadn't even had houseplants in his house and the backyard was tiled. But he had read books on gardening.

He trudged to the edge of the forest along a fairly flat elevation in the terrain. The spot seemed perfectly suitable for his tent, and he put his backpack and bags there.

It was a mixed forest: oaks, beeches, hazels, some bird cherry, birch, a tuft of ash, a large maple, further on slopes with pines. No planted trees: no rows of straight trunks anywhere. He was surprised at how easily he could identify the trees. He had also read books on trees and wood.

Along the stream, the trees had grown long and more or less straight. It all seemed to be usable construction lumber. In the woods, enough dead lumber for a few months of fire.

A few months of fire! He cringed slightly under his alter ego's vicious remark. Just a few months!

It will be summer soon, he managed to nuance his thought.

The cool, rational assessment of the natural resources he could make use of gave his uncertain self some guidance. There would be no question about that. Funny that in the forty-plus years he had spent at sea – an environment that could potentially be life-threatening – he had never had the fear of falling short. Was it because of the thorough training and years of steadily gaining experience in a strict hierarchy aboard, where responsibilities were defined down to the semicolon? Was it because of reliable ships with equally reliable machinists?

He could answer yes to all those questions. Actually, he had never realized to this extent how protected he had lived on the ships, even when he was a captain. There was always a reliable team on board. Now he was solely and exclusively dependent on himself. His knowledge; insight, learning ability and skills were the team he had to lean on.

The realization filled him for the first time since he had planned to break out with a ferocious, unbridled joy. Here he didn't have to listen to anyone and no one had to listen to him. He was alone and sovereign!

Now to become autonomous, said his rational self. That's where this landscape should help him. He gathered an armful of wood and walked back to his preferred camp spot. First, water. For that he needed sand and charcoal and something to put it in. The first he had to find, the second he had to make and the third, after first rejecting the idea several times, he had on: his leather pants. These could serve provisionally as a water filter until he had a better solution. Why hadn't he thought of bringing something that could serve as a filter housing? The question contained the answer: I brought my leather trousers, didn't I? A lighter and more multifunctional piece of equipment has yet to be invented.

It seemed like there were two of him, two brothers who constantly disagreed with each other: the smart kid and the skeptical older brother who questioned everything: which lunatic is going to sacrifice his precious leather pants for a water filter!

In a sort of defense, he held up the bottle of tap water, which had only a bottom left in it. He had counted on a stream of

drinkable water, and that was nowhere to be found here. It was as simple as that.

He became dizzy and had to sit down. He propped his spinning head with his knees and waited for it to pass.

He had been away for a while. He knew what it was; in fact, he found those moments quite enjoyable. Nothing on his mind for a while and nothing in his head. Only the dizziness was unpleasant. Lack of orientation, his doctor had said. Make sure you belong somewhere, his advice had been. As long as you're wandering you don't know what's up or down, and that makes you dizzy.

Fire was quickly made. From his backpack he took a folding army shovel and walked to the stream. He had seen by a strip of thinner vegetation of grass and herbs where there was a sandy ridge, laid down in times when the stream was a fast river. How had he been able to see that? Just by looking closely. He had never seen a sand ridge in reality before and yet he recognized it immediately, thanks to books and movies.

He filled one of the legs of his pants, which he had tied up from below with a leather lace, with yellow, coarse sand that he uncovered from beneath the sod.

Back at the backpack, he first put on a pair of jeans; it was early in the year and water cold. From the fire he took the charcoal and put new wood on it.

Back at the bank, he felled three thin stems with his pruning saw, dragged them to the camp site and tied them together with willow twigs to form a tripod.

To save weight, he had brought a nest of aluminum pans, a compromise. He hung the pants with sand on the tripod and fetched water in the two largest pans, extinguishing the smoking charcoal and using the rest to pour the sand into the pants leg.

Somehow, he felt that his "elder brother" – he no longer had any living brothers – was watching until he made a mistake or did something stupid.

A few larger pieces of the extinguished charcoal he arranged at the bottom of the free pant leg, which he had tied so tightly

that a small opening remained. With the back of the hand axe, he pulverized the remaining charcoal and applied a layer of it to the larger chunks.

Not satisfied with the quality of the water leaking from the sand, he watered it several more times until the water ran clear. He transferred the wet sand to the other pant leg. Only after several pans of water from the stream did he find that the water dripping from the bottom of the filter was good enough to drink. He filled the leg with water up to the crotch and let it pass slowly through the filter. It tasted good, which was a small and quick victory, for which he was overjoyed. He had the idea from an old war book in which the crew of a downed bomber purified swamp water into drinking water this way.

Setting up the tent went smoothly even though it was the first time. He had seen a place in the woods with ferns and picked up arms full of the barren leaves as a mattress. He had made that up himself, he thought.

Meanwhile, the sun had sunk low over the hills behind the forest, he didn't need much daylight, but he did need more wood, and the clay along the bank invited him to make some pots, putting into practice the ceramics course he did.

In the falling dusk he cooked a few hands of whole grain rice with a stock cube in the smallest pan of the three. Slices of dry sausage completed the meal. Vegetables he could pick tomorrow along the stream, there were bright green young ground elder. One of the kinds of wild vegetables Roman soldiers had brought north, as well as the sweet chestnut according to certain historians. Thinking of Roman legionnaires moving through a strange landscape that could harbor enemies everywhere gave some relief to his existential fear of being completely alone at the mercy of untamed nature: he had nothing to fear: no robbers, no enemies or predators, not even bad weather.

As the light softened from the sky and the fire became more luminous, a sense of coziness came. His little camp in the flickering circle of light was all he had and he could make do with it. His sturdy and waterproof tent was like a snail's shell: at night he could retreat into it.

Satisfied with his conclusions, he sat to form some primitive pots and bowls from the clay he had kneaded through only briefly. Quality came later. Forming pots for his household with his own hands from the clay under his feet felt like sealing a contract between him and his chosen biotope. He had become familiar with magic during his travels around the world, and this was earth magic of the purest form. For the first time in his life he had part of the soil he lived on in his hands to turn it into something else he also needed. He had experienced the same magical feeling with the ships he had been skipper of, lived on, known from bow to stern, which moved himself, crew and cargo around the world in freezing cold, tropical heat, storms, past other ships and into dangerous ports.

His hands worked on as his mind looked at the images projecting his memories.

The pots were ready; not expecting rain but dew, he put them in the tent to dry. The day was coming to an end and it was time to update his logbook. To start it, he corrected himself, for it was a new book with blank pages. By the light of a forehead lamp, to be used exclusively for this purpose, he had promised himself, he described with a pen and India ink what he had done, seen and made. He made little drawings to go with them. Satisfied, he blotted off the wet ink and stowed the log in a waterproof bag, pulled apart the fire and went to sleep. He did not need to be afraid of large predators and there was no garden yet that he would have to protect from wildfowl.

He slept poorly, although his fern bed was quite comfortable. All kinds of unstructured thoughts, ideas and memories kept grinding through his head.

It was still dark when he went outside to pee and decided to get started right away. What did he need first, other than his leather pants? First, make a fire. He dug some glowing coals out of the pile of ashes and soon had a fire going. There was still some cooked rice he chewed away resignedly. It would be some time before he could expect the first harvests of crops whose seeds were still untouched in the backpack.

He put the clay goods in the warm ashes and decided to construct a more sustainable water filter out of pottery. The lighting sky gave enough visibility to locate the spot where he had dug clay the previous evening. He now made more work of kneading the raw clay through.

It became light enough to start forming four pots. With a sliver he perforated the bottoms of three of the pots. He worked quickly and adeptly, as if he had never done anything else. The clay pointed itself as he made strands that he piled into rings and smeared together. The handiwork brought peace to his body and soul, eventually to his mind as well.

The sun was already past the zenith when he leaned back contentedly. It was windy with sailing clouds, no rain; the pots could be left here drying for a while.

He stood up and stretched his stiffened legs. A little walk would do him good; let's see what that forest had to offer.

He collected firewood and made an inventory of what else the forest could provide. That looked promising.

On the way back with bundles of firewood on his shoulders, the feeling grew that he and the plot, the nature around him, could relate. Back at the tent, he decided to conduct the experiment here. Apart from the insufficient quality of the water, everything needed for a self-sufficient loner was there. Time to make all the financial arrangements final, which would require him to travel to the port city. On the way back, he could run errands.

As at sea, the iron law of keeping the logbook daily governed this journey. He listed all operations and considerations, kicked out the fire, estimated that it would stay dry, put all things from his backpack in the tent and went the way he had come.

At the bridge in the town, the path ended at a staircase leading to the road, where there was also a bus stop. During the walk and especially while waiting, the realization grew that he was instinctively far away from the human scene. It drizzled a bit and passersby passed hurriedly and introspectively. Even the passengers who did know at what time the bus was passing and joined him under the bus shelter at the last moment, did not

look up or back.

The short trip to the nearest train station struck him as a space journey to other planets. He actually had experienced that his whole life as a sailor when he was ashore. The port was a space/time shunt and only on board did he dare to come out of his cocoon. With the sweethearts in the many ports he had visited, the same thing had happened to him every time. Only when he had felt the woman's naked body against his did he come out. His lovemaking was slow and thoughtful, sometimes for an entire night, because when it stopped he had to get back into his armor. His girlfriends basked in his unadulterated attention and returned it to him. For a moment then he was home; that's how it had felt, he mused on the train.

In the big port city where he had owned a seamen's cafe for a time – bought with the company's golden handshake – he had some business to handle. Since he had rented out his house in a suburb, he took a room in an old-fashioned downtown hotel, where he also dined. The hotel was more familiar than his home.

The next morning – after a copious breakfast – he was waiting at a zebra when he was hit from behind. In a reflex, he grabbed the pole of the traffic light to keep himself upright and with his other hand grabbed a child by the collar, which dived forward from the tricycle he had hit his legs with. Startled cyclists braked and skidded on the wet street, some falling. He held himself upright at the traffic pole and looked in amazement, despite the pain in his calf, at the screaming and struggling child he was holding by the collar. Everything was happening at once: an abusive man snatched the child from his hand, people thronged, a police car stopped and produced two officers, angry fallen cyclists screamed. Philip only grew more abaffled.

The officers managed to calm bystanders somewhat and began asking questions of the seething man with the child. Some fallen cyclists responded in loud voices that the man was wrong. Philip's surprise rose to the top as no one asked him anything. Of the squabbling he understood nothing, he could not even hear the people properly. What space/time twist had he gotten himself into?

Suddenly it was over. The cyclists left in a hurry, the man walked away, swearing at the child he was pushing by the neck on the tricycle, the policemen saluted him, got in and drove away.

A lady next to him, also waiting for to cross, remarked: 'That man accused you of abuse of his infant son, did you realize that? The cyclists told the police that you saved the child by preventing it from ending up in the street between cyclists.'

The pedestrian light changed to green. While crossing, Philip had just a chance to thank the lady for her explanation before she disappeared into the crowd.

He walked all the way to his goal, a law firm, on autopilot. At least his reflexes were good he monologued. He did realize for the first time that grabbing a child could turn out to be very dangerous. That father apparently had not seen his little son scurry down the sloping street and crash into him. What if there had been no bystanders who had seen what actually happened? He didn't want to think about it. He did, of course, anyway. He passed a covered terrace with heaters that was just opening and settled down for an Irish coffee. He could use a pick-me-up.

What had happened? Apparently a father had not been paying attention to his infant son who had promptly ridden down the slope on his tricycle. The man looks up and sees his child wrestling with a strange man. At least, let's assume it was his child. He storms over to save his child and accuses the stranger of kidnapping or something. Only thanks to the fallen cyclists, who saw it all, are the officers convinced that there is no kidnapping. Everyone goes his way and no one thinks about the fact that he, Philip, saved that child's life by his lightning fast reaction. Only that lady who was also waiting had realized it.

He charged and continued on his way to the office that stewarded his assets.

There is nothing to worry about, they assured when he had taken his seat at the discussion table, he just had to sign some documents to confirm that he was domiciled at this office. Regarding his appeal to the shipping company to also pay the second half of the promised buyout fee, they were more pessimis-

tic. The shipping company had been taken over by another from a “flag of convenience country” and did not recognize his claim. A lawsuit would take a long time and cost a lot in legal fees. In other words, he was better off leaving it as it was.

Back on the street, a sense of loneliness, of being alone in an indifferent world, overwhelmed him. His closest family, two brothers, was no longer there. He had to watch his step; he was lucky that there were witnesses who had seen him save the child, otherwise he might have been charged with child theft or child abuse and arrested. To top it off, he could whistle for the rest of the money. What kind of world was this? He decided to go straight back to his place by the river that he had chosen to detach himself from human society. He shivered with discomfort.

The sun had already set when he arrived at his little encampment. Confronting the inhabited world had been grueling. He had had to deal with things he hated and that was done now.

He was tired, dejected and still angry at the same time, had no puff to cook, summarily updated the log and laid himself to sleep chewing on a piece of dry sausage.

His sleep was deep, undisturbed and only ended when the sun rose over the marshes to the east. The peace of the place had crept into his heart that night, so much so that he sat smiling foolishly as he had breakfast with bread, cheese and tea he had brought with him, all the while displaying his new acquisitions: a chainsaw, a canister of non-toxic gasoline, chain oil, a spade without a handle, planting stock, a large axe and a rake, both without a handle, a bag of salt to glaze with and a bottle of whiskey. A larger weight than he was used to carrying on his back. The joy that he had been able to lug all this overpowered the memory of the suffering during the arduous trek to the port city. After all, he was home! Quite surprised by the embracing feeling this place offered, he inspected everything, more to get reacquainted than out of a desire for control. Each acquisition he dragged in made his home more habitable, more innocuous.

The pots in the ashes were well dried, but cracked here and there. Consequently, it had been very raw clay. Later, when he

had picked up the parts for the water filter, he found that there were drying cracks in those as well. He made clay-silt and filled the cracks. He allowed the rest of the sludge to settle, so he obtained terra sigilata, a liquid sludge of the finest particles that remains on top and with which he could paint the pottery watertight. Salt glaze should make the inside waterproof. The pots were yet not dry enough; the construction of a field kiln could wait. A sigh of relief made it clear that he was dreading that. It was quite a big project and he was doing everything for the first time.

Working took on a certain routine, without the haste that had rushed him the first day, and thus solidified the choice to realize his settlement in this place. He proved to himself, with every action he undertook, that he could do it.

He had seeds with him for which now was the ideal sowing time, it said on the bags. To start a vegetable garden, he had to turn over the sod, and for that he needed a spade. From a long ash stem, which he had brought with foresight from the riverbank, he made a thin handle for the rake, a thicker one for the shovel, and from the lower end he cut with the small axe a long handle for the big axe. There was no wood left for the chop and tiller, they would have to wait. He hardened the fresh ash wood in the fire so that, according to the scouting book, he could use it immediately. The axe handle would have to dry the longest and he set it aside.

With his brand-new spade he began to turn over a narrow strip in a square for peas that could climb against a fence he was to build against deer and other game. It wasn't easy, and when the handle broke on the tough sod, he decided to mow the long grass first with a newly acquired hand scythe. That too was difficult, especially since he had to do it bent over. Disappointed, he quit and went to make dinner. By the light of the fire, he cut a new handle for the spade. He hadn't thought that building a vegetable garden on his own would take so much effort. The soil seemed so accommodating.

The next day went better, mainly because he recognized that it was hard and slow work to manually turn over a tough old sod

and transform the soil into a generous seedbed.

He got connected when he began to understand the interplay between plant roots and soil. He mowed a patch and cut the sod with the spa into small squares, prying them loose and turning them over by hand and paving them into a seedbed, so to speak, so that no grass squeaked in between. He recalled from the gardening books he had studied that this was a method barely tolerated by gardeners.

He covered the seedbeds against prying with dead fern leaves from the forest. Walking back and forth between the ferns and the garden, he experienced something of the timeless magic of the tolerating, giving earth, the vast skies in many shades of blue; rows of clouds, lit from below by a rosier sun. If he stood still and let his mind reach out, he could imagine the thin blanket of air in all its magnitude, layers of air that fashioned deadly radiation from the sun into beneficent light that made everything grow.

After a final show of color, the sky faded and he returned. He ate of his supplies by the light of the fire, wrote in his log and laid himself to sleep in his tent, weary from the unusual work and satisfied with what he had accomplished with his calculating head and utterly inexperienced body.

After an initial deep sleep of a few hours, his head began to grind. Flashes of his girlfriends alternated with situations on the high seas or ports. His self-image began to show cracks. He had always thought he had been a nice man, but the delirium he found himself in was a maelstrom of self-blame, regret and shame.

He dared not go on sleeping and sat upright with the sleeping bag around him staring into the night. His displeasure and discontent with the world ashore had always so engrossed him that it had gotten in the way of his perspective on himself. For as he made fewer and fewer ports, he had never contacted his girlfriends in the places he no longer visited. Normally he sent a telegram that he was coming and might stay two, three days. The never coming again had been insidious, but it hadn't been kind.

He drank a glass of whiskey and, having acknowledged that his dealings with women had not been impeccable, his mind calmed down and he dared to lay it down on the pillow to continue sleeping.

2. Fire teepee and field kiln

The new day began with light rain. At the first murmur on the tent canvas, he shot awake, crawled outside and groped for the pots to put them inside. Growling and sweltering with adrenaline, he decided to wash up in the rain and to set up a shelter for the fire, firewood and drying clay goods. Not bothering to dress his wet body, he ran at a trot to the stream, axe and chainsaw in hand. He sawed and chopped in a sweat to stay warm in the chilly rain and to work the electrical agitation out of his muscles. Working naked in uncomfortable wetness was exhilaratingly primal and a boost to his fitness. He brought harvested wood to his little camp until he felt it was enough. Tired from all the hauling, he crawled into his tent, dried himself with the only towel he had, and put clothes on over his moist skin. Under his sleeping bag, he lay sweltering hot and pondered the next steps. He had poles, hazel shoots and willow twigs to tie, he only needed thatch to cover the roof. Across the stream was a field of reeds. Green shoots were already showing among the dead stalks from the previous year, but they were yet to be mowed. He had bought that hand scythe for that purpose, which had been initiated the previous day to cut the grass where he was going to dig.

He put on shorts and sandals on his bare feet, as he had to wade through the stream.

The water was stone cold; fortunately the reed bed consisted of tussocks on which he could stand with dry feet. Mowing was hard work: not only were the reeds at the bottom hard, he had to do it bent over. Each armful he carried across to stretch his back, though the water was so cold that his legs became unresponsive.