

Paul parked in front of Hanna's apartment in Minneapolis and Marie went up and rang the doorbell. It was a Friday afternoon in the middle of September and the three of them were driving down to Haroldson. They had just heard that Dad had been diagnosed with liver cancer.

Hanna rushed out of the house in jeans and navy hooded sweatshirt, carrying a backpack, her long white-blond hair caught up in a ponytail. She put her arms around Marie. At the car, Paul also stood up to hug Hanna, tears in his eyes, and in hers.

"It's such a shock," said Hanna. "After we had that wonderful summer!"

"Yes," said Paul. "I can hardly believe it." Liver cancer was serious. Dad had been optimistic on the phone, but Mother sounded frightened. Dad would have surgery that week and they all wanted to go to Haroldson to see him, and to help Mother make plans.

Driving south, however, it was hard to keep Dad's condition in mind. Hanna was effervescent, hanging over the front seats. "I'm so excited about this year!" she said. "We're doing *The Cherry Orchard*, and I'm going to play Anya." Hanna was a theater major at a small Lutheran college in the middle of the Twin Cities.

"Fill us in," said Marie, smiling across at Paul, who was driving. "Why is it so great? I don't know anything about it."

"Chekhov was a Russian," said Hanna. "Sort of about the same time as Tolstoy. His plays are performed all the time. This one is about a family who is going to lose their estate, including its cherry orchard. We're already starting to work on it, talking about the sets and how we are going to do it."

"Do they lose the orchard?" asked Marie.

"Oh yes," said Hanna. "You can hear an axe chopping down a tree in the end."

"How sad," said Marie.

Paul exchanged a look with Marie. She knew how he felt about trees. Beyond the car windows, cornfields, dry and yellowing, flew by.

"Yes," said Hanna. "You know, I was so happy to meet your daughter this summer, Marie. I wished I could speak more French, to understand her. But I loved spending time with her."

"Oh Hanna," said Marie. "You were wonderful. You saved us!" Hanna's smattering of schoolbook French had helped Grace feel at home when she came for vacation. Hanna had taken Marie's shy daughter Grace out in the canoe, taken her on walks in the woods and even driven her to mass a few times."

"It was a wonderful summer," said Hanna. "And now this." She paused. "And I'm going to finish college this year."

Paul could feel Hanna's incredulosity behind him. "I think I can stay with Dad in the hospital," he said. He was working slowly on his graduate program. "I can drop a class if I have to. And I've turned over the sections I'm teaching to my friend. Marie says she can handle the apartment management for a couple of weeks. Mother probably has to teach. I think I'm elected." Paul was determined to be for Dad what Dad had been for him when he had had polio as a child. Such a short time ago! How life folded on itself.

"I'm glad you can do it," said Hanna.

When they got to Haroldson, the evening air was crisp and the sun had already disappeared. Mother, Dad, Paul, Marie and Hanna converged around the kitchen table, eating the lasagna Dad had made while Mother was at school.

Paul explained his plan and Mother reluctantly agreed. Dad's surgery would be at the Sioux Valley Hospital in Sioux Falls. One hour west of Haroldson, it was the closest big hospital and Dad's doctor was also there. Mother would save her sick leave from school for later, when Paul wasn't around. They expected Dad to be in the hospital for a couple of weeks.

Dad was chipper. He did not feel any particular symptoms, though he thought his digestion was somewhat off. The surgery was meant to cut out the tumors in his liver. His liver would regenerate over time. "If they don't get it all, I'll go in there with a spoon," Dad joked. But then there would be chemotherapy. It did not sound good to Paul. Cancer was usually a death sentence, if not in months, then in years. It was a blow to all the plans Dad and Mother had made for their retirement over the years.

"It's so great to have you all home," said Mother. She too seemed her usual, strong, gentle self. But Paul detected the anxiety she tried to hide. "Kristen and her boys will come tomorrow." Kristen and her husband lived not far away with their two small boys. "It will be like old home weekend!"

"Could we sing?" asked Marie after supper. "I never get to sing enough these days." She worked full time in a health food store. And she loved the Mikkelson habit of gathering around the piano.

"Of course!" said Mother. "That sounds like a great idea."

The dishes were packed into the dishwasher and the small group joined Mother at the upright, blonde spinet piano in the living room. Marie paged through the music books. There were songs from musicals, pop songs, gospel hymns and the Lutheran hymnbook. Mother's hands ranged over the keys, playing a somber gospel hymn and Marie joined in.

Paul and Hanna raised their voices and Dad sang with his strong, joyous tenor: "Oh, Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds thy hands have made. I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, thy power throughout the universe displayed."

Marie's face was transformed by the song. Her voice was solid, without the wide-ranging colors she often gave the music she sang. Light shone in Hanna's lovely face with its classic features also. She was a grownup, reflected Paul. She who had always been one of 'the little kids.' The chorus rolled out: "Then sings my soul, my savior God to thee, how great thou art! How great thou art."

It was Dad's clear, shining face which moved Paul the most. Dad began quietly, "On a hill far away, stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame." Paul could hear in his mind Tennessee Ernie Ford's serious, humble voice hitting the notes with his perfect baritone.

It was difficult not to cry, and in fact, Paul could see that tears streamed down Mother's face. He gave up trying to hide them and sang through the lump which had arisen in his throat. "I will cling to the old rugged cross, and exchange it someday for a crown."

"Whew!" said Dad, when the song ended. "On that note, I think I'll go to bed."

Paul sniffed back moisture and hugged Dad. Mother stood up, and she too hugged Paul and each of the others. She followed Dad down the hall.

“Thank you, Marie,” said Paul. “That was just the right thing for us all to do.”

“Yes,” said Hanna. “Such great songs!” She sat down at the piano. “I wish I could play,” she said. No one played the piano as well as Mother.

But it was also quiet time. Paul wanted to go downstairs to the basement den with Marie. He had brought E. O. Wilson’s recent book *On Human Nature* home with him and he was anxious to read it. But Hanna wasn’t really ready to go to bed.

“You play the guitar, though,” said Marie.

“I little,” said Hanna. “But not as well as Paul.” She smiled up at him. Neither of them had brought a guitar home.

“What are you going to do next year?” asked Marie, plumping down on the sofa. “Do you have plans?” Paul sat down beside her.

“The Twin Cities is full of good theaters,” said Hanna. “And I’m getting good at making cappuccinos! That’s how actors make money, you know,” she laughed.

“Really?” asked Paul. He had imagined that Hanna, like himself, would want to teach.

“Really,” said Hanna. “I’ve been bitten by the acting bug. I can’t go back.”

“Good for you,” said Marie. “Follow your dreams! We can’t claim to be any more settled than you are,” she said, smiling at Paul. “But we’re getting there.”

Paul looked rueful. Marie had been so accommodating to his tenuous flailing about, but he knew what he wanted, and it was beginning to come together.

“Do you guys want some tea or cocoa?” asked Hanna. “I’ll make some.”

“Yes!” said Marie. She pulled a pillow down and tucked it behind her. “Maybe chamomile tea, if your folks have it.”

“Sleepytime tea,” said Hanna from the kitchen.

Paul remembered how he and Line and Marty had talked late at night when everyone else was in bed. He relaxed, putting his arm around his wife possessively. It was a new configuration. They had all been at Lake Michigami that summer, but there was lots of coming and going, and work on the new front room Dad had added to the cabin. Not much time for talk.

During the summer Paul had been busy, laying insulation, sheet-rocking and then painting. Dad put in the wiring and figured out the difficult things, like where to put the walls. They all laid the linoleum tiles. Mother hung the drapes she wove in her usual colors, gold, burnt orange and brown, in a loose weave which let lots of light through. Paul had scoured the rust off old George, the iron, pot-bellied stove, and treated it with stove blacking. Last of all, Paul and Dad had stapled up ceiling tile. Everyone was pleased with the new room. Mother moved her rocking chair, spinning wheel and loom in right away.

That summer Dad had been as full of life as Paul had ever seen him. Paul remembered an evening when he and Dad watched iridescent dragonflies in the sunset down at the dock, in awesome wonder. Dad was like a kid, pointing things out, moving back and forth. The lake was higher than it had ever been. It had been a great summer. And now this.

The dark house in Haroldson was very quiet. But Marie was just the right person to ask Hanna questions. “So you work in a coffeeshop?” she asked.

“I will show it to you the next time you come,” said Hanna, passing out mugs of tea. “It’s a place where students hang out, and there’s music sometimes. Pretty funky. The whole neighborhood, Cedar-Riverside, is full of University of Minnesota students. Both sides of the river, actually. My college is on the Westside, where the Guthrie Theater and the Theater in the Round are. I feel really at home there,” Hanna said.

To Paul, Hanna seemed confident, clear. He wondered whether he had been that confident at her age. But she was also elusive, amorphous. Would she be a good actress?

“It sounds nice,” said Marie. “I think that’s where Bob Dylan got his start.” She turned to Paul. “Dinkytown, wasn’t it?”

“That’s on the other side of the river,” said Hanna. “I like singing, but I **really** like acting. I spent so much time hanging around the Guthrie that they finally let me usher. It’s just volunteer, but it’s fun!”

“Boyfriends?” asked Marie.

Hanna’s innocent face colored. “Nope,” she said.

The mention of boyfriends seemed to put the damper on the evening. Paul and Marie went downstairs to their room, and Hanna went off to hers.

On Sunday Dad stood in his church pulpit, arrayed in his white robes and green silk stole. He explained his diagnosis and his coming surgery to the congregation, and then preached a vibrant sermon from Paul’s letter to the Romans, Romans 14, verses 1-12. “For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself,” wrote the apostle Paul, for whom Paul had been named.

“If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.” The warmth in Dad’s weathered face had always been very apparent when he stood up in front of his congregation. Now, in his weakness, he was stronger than ever.

“This text is about judgment,” said Dad. “Paul is trying to get the Romans to stop worrying about how their neighbor lives his life. We will all answer to God in the end, says the apostle. We belong to the Lord. It is in this that I take comfort, and so should we all.”

Paul was transfixed. How had he ever doubted that the Christian church spoke to people’s inmost needs? Here he was, sitting beside his wife, two of his sisters, Kristen’s husband and small boys who wriggled in the pew nearby. The family that Dad and Mother had built extended in all directions. “None of us lives for ourselves alone,” repeated Paul to himself.

That night, Dad and Paul drove to the hospital so Dad could prep for the surgery. Paul found a rooming house where he could stay cheaply for a couple of weeks. On Monday afternoon he had a chance to talk to the doctor, but he didn’t get to see Dad, who was in the intensive care unit.

“The surgery went okay, we think,” said Dr. Dahl, an assisting surgeon in the big teaching hospital. He wore green cotton clothes and the mask which had covered his face now hung down around his neck. Paul had been waiting for him, and they talked in a pale, antiseptic-looking small conference room outside the surgery. “But he’ll be in the ICU for a couple of days. There’s some drainage and bleeding in his chest cavity and so on, which is to be expected.”

“So do you think you got all the tumors?” asked Paul. He felt odd and grown up. He did not know exactly what to ask.

“Your Dad’s liver was basically healthy,” began Dr. Dahl. “So we felt safe in taking half of it. But we’re not certain whether we got all of the cancerous tissue. In a couple of weeks we’ll do more x-rays to find out.” Dr. Dahl reached out to touch Paul’s shoulder. “Tell your Mother things went well. Your Dad needs to rest. We’ll settle on a treatment plan in a week or so.”

“Thanks,” said Paul. “Can I call her from here?” It was 5:30 p.m. Mother would just be home from school, desperate for news.

“Sure,” said Dr. Dahl. “I can talk to her if you like.”

“Yeah,” said Paul. “That would be good.” He gave Dr. Dahl the number and listened as Mother asked some of the same questions. Then Dr. Dahl stood up and handed the phone to Paul, leaving the door open as he went out.

“I can’t see him,” said Paul. “It might be a couple of days before I can,” he told Mother. “I’ll give the nurse a note to take to him.” He was thinking fast.

Mother’s voice sounded anguished. “I guess it’s no use to be there anyway, then,” she said. “He knows he is in our prayers. I just talked to Line on the phone. She’s sending some articles on positive visualization she uses with her patients in California.”

“We have a wonderful family, Mother,” said Paul.

“Yes,” said Mother. “We do. Marty’s talking about coming at Christmas. So many people are sending me things, food and flowers,” said Mother. “I don’t know what to do with it all!”

“I’ll tell him,” said Paul.

For the next two days, Paul camped out in the waiting room closest to the ICU. The nurses, who came and went in scrubs, shower caps, masks and booties, got to know Paul and passed information back and forth. Dad’s body was working overtime, trying to heal and regenerate that liver. Paul felt Dad knew he was there. And it was a good place to concentrate.

Paul pulled out *On Human Nature* and took notes as the concepts were pretty far out. E.O. Wilson was an ‘ant man.’ He had been studying ants and other insects since he was a kid and, in this book, he applied some of his findings to vertebrates, and even to humans. Paul read carefully, thoughtfully. Perhaps he could read some of it to Dad in the coming days.

On the third morning Paul arrived to find Dad in a hospital room. Dad’s face looked grey and bewiskered, but he was smiling. “Got to go for a walk today the doctors tell me,” he said. “Are you going to come with me?”

“You bet!” said Paul. “It’s so good to see you!”

When Dad was ready, Paul tried to help ease him out of bed. The large incision was bandaged and painful. Dad walked hunched over, dragging an IV pole alongside him. Paul felt very strong beside him.

“It’s surprising,” said Dad, “to wake up like this. Never thought I’d see this day. But we’re going to beat this thing.”

Paul thought of all that Dad’s generation had done. “You got through the Depression,” he said. “You got through the war. And you raised six kids.” Paul laughed. “I’m sure you’ll get through this.” He walked slowly beside Dad through the bright

hallways, littered with gurneys and equipment. “I remember those awful surgeries you got me through,” he said more soberly.

“Shoe’s on the other foot now, Paul,” said Dad.

“You didn’t want me to get a better wheelchair,” said Paul. “You thought it would cripple me!”

“Yup,” said Dad, shuffling painfully along.

Doctors and nurses hurried by, just as if they were on a busy street. One of the ICU nurses encouraged Dad. “Looking good Mr. Mikkelson,” she said.

“Thanks,” said Dad. But he noticed the lack of the usual greeting: ‘Pastor Mikkelson.’ “Just an ordinary person now. I think I’m going to have to retire, Paul,” he said.

“Can you do that?” asked Paul. Dad was 62. But of course he was right. Fighting liver cancer would take everything Dad had. He would not be able to attend to pastoral duties as well.

“Yes, I think so,” Dad said. “Your Mother and I have talked about it. She’s ready too. She wants to leave at the end of the school year. I’m hoping I can hang in there until then.” He turned around, leaning on Paul’s arm. “37 years a pastor,” he said. “That’s a pretty good run.”

Paul thought about it. In all those years, he did not know of a time when Dad had been sick or missed a service. Dad had been staunch in the small congregations he had led. “Move up to the lake then?” he asked.

“Yup,” said Dad. “In the spring.” His tired face shone. He had been planning it for so long. “Your Mother’s excited,” he said. “She points out that we’ve had opposite days off all this time. I work weekends and she works during the week. She wants us to have time off together!”

“Oh yes,” said Paul. “It’s really tough.” He was thinking of Marie, who worked more than Paul wanted her to, long hours five days a week at the health food store. He hoped she was doing all right by herself in Bemidji. It had been a long time since they had been apart. He was afraid to call her, because of the long distance phone bills. But maybe he would tonight.

When they got back to the room, lunch had arrived. Dad looked at it glumly. White bread, a scoop of potatoes, a piece of meat with gravy, frozen vegetables. “Didn’t bring some of that fresh-ground whole wheat bread did you,” he asked. “Or a cob of fresh corn?”

“Dad!” said Paul. He knew Dad was teasing. He helped Dad swing the IV pole around to the correct side and get laboriously into bed. “I’ll help you cut your meat. Got to eat!” The head of the bed was raised up. “That the right angle?” Paul asked.

“Yeah,” said Dad. “Feels pretty good. What are you going to eat?”

“Probably the same thing,” said Paul. “I’ll go down to the cafeteria in a minute.” He would sit with Dad during lunch and then leave him to take a nap.

“I remember how unhappy my mother was with the food at the home, once she got there,” said Dad. “She had to leave that garden, the strawberries and vegetables that she had tended all her life.” Grandma and Grandpa Mikkelson had been dead for several years.

“I remember,” said Paul. How often he had squatted as a kid in Grandma Mikkelson’s strawberry patch, eating sun-drenched berries. “Some summers I was in the hospital and the other kids got to stay with her. I was stuck up in traction one summer.”

“Yes indeed, Paul,” said Dad. He took a bite of potatoes and gravy. “And look at you now! It was worth it, right?”

“Oh yes,” said Paul. “I hardly even notice I’m disabled! Except one leg is bearing the load more than the other. I still want to get up in the Boundary Waters area, and I’m worried about portaging. But I can handle weight pretty well. It’ll probably be okay.” He was embarrassed to talk to Dad about this. Dad’s future probably didn’t have such adventures in it.

A nurse came in with a vase filled with autumn-colored dahlias and a box of Russell Stover mints. The flowers looked very vivid against the white walls of the room.

“Chocolate?” asked Paul. Who would give a person recovering from liver surgery a box of chocolate?!

“I guess that’s for you,” said Dad. “But I might have one, if I ever get through this.” He indicated the unappetizing lunch.

“Don’t do any more than you can, Mr. Mikkelson,” said the nurse. “Take it easy.” She checked on the chart that hung on the end of the bed and left.

Paul took a mint, to tide him over until lunch. He was pleased to be there. Of all the people in the hospital, only he really knew who Dad was, what his life was like, the wholeness of it. “Well,” he said finally, “I could finish that for you, if you want.” It looked like Dad couldn’t manage to eat everything.

“Go ahead,” said Dad. “I guess I could use a rest.” He slumped down. “Maybe lower this bed a little.”

Paul lowered the head of the bed and Dad tried to stretch out. Paul took the tray and finished Dad’s food. He took two more chocolate mints and left Dad to nap.

When Mother came on the weekend, Dad was a little stronger. There was still a danger of infection and Dad was taking antibiotics and pain pills. “Not sure my liver can handle these,” said Dad, looking at the pills. “My stomach feels like it belongs to someone else!” But the incision was healing.

Mother looked shaken to see Dad so ill. But she settled down and was her usual dignified self. Paul took his book into the waiting room, to give Mother and Dad a chance to be alone. He made a cocoon around himself, ignoring the coming and going of people. Hospitals, he thought. Caused as much problems as they solved. Some level of anger had been growing in him over the fact that Dad had cancer.

Paul did not want to become a scientist, himself. He did not aim to discover anything. But the world of biology was now discussing E. O. Wilson’s idea that social behaviors might have an evolutionary basis, that human behavior might be influenced by one’s genes. Taking a macro look at humanity, Wilson showed that aggression, sexual reproduction, even altruism served humanity’s gene pool and had kept the human species intact over millions of years. Religion seemed to challenge his theories the most, Paul was interested to find. Distinctively human, modern man was just as prone to belief in religious myth as ever.

After lunch with Dad, Paul and Mother went down to the cafeteria. “It’s so hard to see him this way,” said Mother, breaking down outside of Dad’s presence.

“Yes,” said Paul gravely. “It’s isn’t something we ever thought would happen. I’m glad Marie and I moved back to Minnesota. I can’t preach for Dad, but I’ll help in another other way I can.”

“Don’t worry,” said Mother. “The church will find substitutes. We just have to get Dad well again.”

Paul looked at her. Perhaps this was the time to be optimistic, but Paul was not so sure.

“I keep thinking of him drinking all those cups of green tea as he prepared his sermons,” said Mother. “Do you think that could be what caused this?”

“The water’s full of nitrates out here,” said Paul. “Maybe. People’s systems react to different things. I don’t think we can know.”

“You’re probably right. I’m not sick,” sighed Mother. “But we do see a lot of cancer in our area.”

Paul shook his head. Human interference caused as many problems as it cured. Somewhere between anger and acceptance was the right place to be, but Paul couldn’t find it at that moment.