

When the old frame Mikkelson cabin on Lake Michigami was bulldozed in November, Paul was on hand with a camera. The cabin had been emptied of furniture and anything that could be used. What was left, windows, doors, shelving, came down like paper. Torqued on themselves in a sad heap, the walls looked pretty flimsy. Paul felt it in the pit of his stomach, as if he too was falling. What Paul thought of as Dad's dream came down in a day.

It hadn't snowed yet but it was cold. The idea was to clear the site before the snow came and be ready in the spring to lay new foundation. Paul took lots of photos of the demolition. His mind told him it was a good thing, but his heart felt sad. When Ellie first brought the idea to him, he was greatly relieved. The old cabin, with its buckling foundation and cheap construction, was not salvageable. And a coalition of siblings wasn't in the cards. Most lived too far away. Paul was very happy when Bruce and Ellie took the lead.

Bud, who ran the battered yellow backhoe, looked happy and warm, moving back and forth in layers of wool and an old fleece hat, pulling his levers. He selectively knocked down walls so that the roof wouldn't fall on him. Paul waved to him as the backhoe began to lift debris into a dump truck. The craft barn, which had never been finished, also had to go. Paul remembered working on the framing and flooring. When they were finished, there would simply be a level space where the buildings had been.

Scraps of an old dirty rag rug fluttered out of the loader, as Paul watched. Paul thought of Aunt Rose, who had put up her little gingham curtains so cheerfully when she first took over the cabin. None of these domestic details was left. It was all rubble. But neither were his parents, or Aunt Rose alive any longer to know. Paul thought Dad would have approved in any case. He didn't like waste, but he was always up for new projects. Paul snapped a few more photos. He was wearing gloves with the fingers cut off against the cold.

By this time, Paul had spent quite a bit of time with Bruce and Ellie on the idea of a new cabin, trying to make the plan workable for their far-flung siblings. The Morlands were thinking about retirement, about their grandchildren. But also about the family as a whole. Ellie thought Paul should live in the new log home full time, maintaining it for all of them. Given the peripatetic life he was living, Paul thought this a great idea. The new log building would become his year-round home.

As Dad had hoped to, Paul wanted to see the lake throughout the seasons, something no one had been able to do so far. He wanted to watch ice form on the lake and then break up in the spring. He wanted to keep records of temperatures, snowfall, animals and birds coming and going.

Ellie had gotten all the brochures she could from the Northwoods Log Homes Company. The Bach family who ran it was experienced and full of ideas. They had built their own home across the lake long ago. Paul, who was spending the winter in an apartment in Bemidji, visited this original home and took photos for Ellie. Building the equipment to strip logs and true them into uniformity, the family had been in business since the 1950's.

The late fall day was short. It was twilight when the big equipment quit for the day, leaving part of the craft barn to be collected the next. Paul went down to the lake to

have a look. The waves were choppy and looked terribly cold. Grey clouds lay heavy over the lake, with a sliver of pink at the horizon where the sun had slipped away. Pieces of the dock had been piled up on the shore, the canoes tucked below the beach house. Deciduous trees had lost their leaves by this time; only the pines showing green.

Paul drove back to Bemidji, thirty miles north on a straight, empty blacktop, his headlights shining before him. He turned on the radio, a bit apprehensively. A year ago Paul had been blindsided by Linda Ronstadt singing "Willin'," a favorite song of Marie's. "I've been warped by the rain, driven by the snow, I'm drunk and dirty, don't you know." Paul had had to pull over to the side of the highway, convulsed with pain and sobs. "But if you give me weed, whites and wine," Linda sang from somewhere deep within her. "And you show me a sign, I'll be willin' ... to be movin'."

The hollow in Paul's body where Marie should have been was huge. But he had resolved not to shut off the pain, to experience it, though he was sometimes surprised by its intensity. It had been over a year, almost two since Marie died.

And Paul was also willin'. He didn't do weed, drugs or even much wine, but he was finding ways to survive. He was learning to make his own life. He did not want another woman. He could not even imagine someone taking Marie's place. In some unusual way, she was still there. He was considering getting another dog, however. When he was more settled. It would not be Archie, but it would be a companion.

Paul's apartment was empty. He went over to the computer and plugged in the camera to see what photos he had gotten. He would put them up on a website he was keeping so that his sisters, snug in their homes in California, New York and St. Paul, could see what progress was being made on the site. Everyone knew the cabin was coming down that day. They would be waiting for his post.

Notwithstanding the destruction, the photos were gorgeous spread across the screen, the green-painted cabin walls in splinters in the blue November light, as if a hurricane had hit. The heavy equipment looked powerful. Paul captioned each photo and uploaded them to his website. The deed had been done.

On Friday night, Paul took two large pizzas and a six-pack over to the Hickmans' house. He was trying to make a habit of it when he was in town. It was finally beginning to snow. Paul wrapped a blanket around the pizzas when he carried them into the house to keep them warm.

The kids greeted him with joy. "What did you bring?" Andre asked.

"Same ol' pizzas," said Paul. "This one's everything, with garlic. And this one's plain. Just tomatoes, cheese and sausage."

Pretty little Jeanne wrinkled her nose. "I don't like garlic," she said.

"How do you know?" asked Joe, who was 15. "Have you ever tasted it?"

"No," conceded Jeanne.

Grace laid plates around the table. Paul knew she was glad not to cook! Grace's life was full of church work and her kids, who were growing like weeds.

Dory, the oldest of the Hickman kids, poured out milk. She was ambitious and wanted to become a nurse, had started classes at the university. She was just 18, the same age as Marie had been when she became pregnant with Grace, Paul realized with a pang.

"Startin' to come down out there?" asked Gerald. Gerald worked at the town's small airport, flying, but also shipping and whatever else needed doing.

"Lightly," said Paul. "Beer?" he asked, handing Gerald a cold one.

“So the cabin got bulldozed?” Gerald asked.

“Yup,” said Paul. “Flimsy as a house of cards. I put some pictures up. Want to see them?”

The computer was at a little desk in the kitchen. Gerald was suspicious of what the kids might do with it, and wanted to be able to monitor its use. Paul typed his website into a browser and the photos came up clearly on the screen. “Aaargh,” said Paul ruefully, looking at the twisted scraps of green-painted wall. “That summer I spent painting it. Can’t have been three years ago! What a waste.”

Gerald chuckled. The kids crowded around. How many summers they had all spent at the lake!

“He looks like he’s having fun. I’d like to drive a bulldozer,” said Benjamin, the youngest, who was now quite tall at eight.

“I think it’s a backhoe,” said Gerald.

Grace put Paul at the end of the table and Gerald at the other. The two pizzas disappeared into the family with hardly a murmur.

“How’s the team doing?” Paul asked Joe, who, like his Dad, was a basketball star, tall and rangy.

“Okay,” said Joe. “We won last week.” Andre, looked as if he was about to say something, but Joe put a lanky arm around his neck, squelching him. “No thanks to this little Indian,” he said.

Grace beamed at her oldest son. Paul sensed a story. “What happened?”

“Hid my shoes. Almost didn’t make it,” said Joe, teasingly. Andre’s smile was as wide as his face. “Jealous?”

“Naw,” said Andre. He was much more interested in bugs and animals, a kid after Paul’s own heart. Paul hoped he would be a scientist. Of all of the kids, Andre was taking most to the idea of Native American lore and history. All of the kids were enrolled members of the Leech Lake Band, with one quarter Ojibwe heritage. But, like their father, most of them just wanted to assimilate, to be ordinary, mongrel kids, to have the opportunities anyone did in Bemidji, Minnesota.

“I’ve got to get to one of the games,” said Paul. He resolved to spend some time with Andre, to see what he was up to. Andre was eleven, stockier and shorter than his brother.

“You’ll stay and watch *Joan of Arcadia* with us?” said Jeanne. “It’s about a girl who talks to God.”

“I remember,” said Paul. “I saw it with you once before.” Paul looked over at Grace, who appeared a little sheepish. Of course he would stay. Being in the bosom of this family was something Marie had given him. He was going to enjoy it to the fullest.

The kids put Paul in the middle of the sofa, right in front of the television, with Jeanne and Benjamin on either side, leaning on him. Paul relished the warmth and sweetness of their bodies. He was careful not to ask for it, but glad when it happened. Jeanne especially reminded him of Marie with her dark curls. She was nine now.

The television show was about an ordinary American family, whose daughter, just barely a teen, heard God talking to her through various people she met, telling her what to do. No one else in the family heard His voice, so they thought Joan’s actions bizarre.

Paul filtered it through Grace as he watched, wondering what she thought of this. Grace was the most devout person he knew. She had loved the story of Bernadette of

Lourdes. Perhaps she did not find the story of Joan of Arcadia, Maryland, blasphemous. All of us are more liberal now, Paul thought. He doubted if his own father would have approved. But then again, he wasn't sure. Dad could surprise you.

Paul was interested to see that even Gerald stuck around to watch the show and all of the kids were wrapped up in it. If you must watch television, Paul thought, it was certainly a good thing if the whole family watched it together. When the show was over, Paul hugged everyone good night.

"You'll be here for Thanksgiving, won't you?" asked Grace. The churches in Bemidji got together to host a huge Thanksgiving dinner every year. Paul always helped, but he was spending quite a bit of time in St. Paul as well.

"Wouldn't miss it," said Paul. "I'm looking forward to seeing your mother! Good night!" Gerald's mother Jane was a fixture at St. Phillips Catholic Church. She survived her sister, who had recently succumbed to diabetes. The two of them were full-blooded Ojibwe.

Paul drove home, the thickening snow lit up by his headlights. Heritage was so interesting, he thought. Jane was the only grandmother Grace's kids had now. Gerald's father had been a trucker, killed in a highway accident.

And Marie had been unable to enlighten Grace about her father. "It was all so shadowy," was all she could say. Marie had run away to Montreal at 17, to sing in clubs with various groups. She didn't even know the last name of the guy she had been with, though she thought he was English in background. The ensuing pain of her scandalous pregnancy and leaving Grace to be raised by her family in Quebec had been very tough.

In Paul's family, there was nothing shadowy at all. He had known three of his grandparents, all Norwegians born in America. Mother's Danish immigrant father had died when she was little. He had been an itinerant pastor, a much-respected man. Recently there had been a lot of talk about DNA tests, in police investigations and determining paternity, for instance.

E.O. Wilson contended that people carried emotional and intellectual traits on their genes, as well as physical ones. Paul was always going back mentally to Wilson's great book *On Human Nature*. He had read it long ago, but now was reading it again. It was a watershed statement, so well-written, about humans, their evolution and what could be expected of them. Wilson was still writing book after book. He was obsessed with closing the gap between science and the humanities, putting the latter on a stronger footing. Paul was in complete agreement.

Wilson also recognized the human need for religion, however. He said that human evolution was an epic, "the best myth we will ever have." But man needs the hot, emotional promise of transcendence in an often brutal life. Science was cold. It could not provide this. Wilson found hope in knowledge. "Man's destiny is to know," he said. Brain science was at the moment burgeoning and Paul was paying attention.

Paul was grateful for the freedom his web design work afforded him. He did not compartmentalize his mind, giving part to religion and part to science. He simply did the things he had always done: helped with the big Thanksgiving celebration of gratitude and good will in Bemidji, and sang in the choirs he loved. He listened to Christian sermons with a kind of historical interest and a mind attentive to the thoughts of the people he knew and loved. Paul often thought of his Uncle David's words, "The older I get, the bigger God becomes for me."

The Christian tradition was Paul's own, and Christ was his guide, as he had been Bonhoeffer's. But God was much more than humans could conceive of or understand. Similar to the way he left his mind open to pain, to all the winds that passed through it, Paul wanted to be empty of certainty. It seemed to him that truth could only be found in an environment of freedom.

At the beginning of December, Paul went back to St. Paul. He did not want to miss the Christmas choruses at Ellie's church, Gloria Dei Lutheran, led by Brad Engstrom. Once he had felt this way about the choir in Bemidji, but its great director Janos Szabo was long gone. And he and Ellie and Bruce were actively planning what the new cabin would be like.

When he rolled into the driveway in a light snowfall, Ellie was at the door to meet him!

"Come on, Paul," she said, giving him a hug as Paul blew into the warm house. "I want to show you the rough plans we've been making." Ellie with a project in front of her was unstoppable, Paul had found!

"Hang on," said Paul. "Hang on there. I'll just put my stuff away." He lifted the milk, hamburger and butter he had brought out of a grocery sack and into Mother's refrigerator.

"I didn't expect you," said Ellie. She was wearing jeans and a warm Norwegian sweater, her after school clothes. "But I have some lasagna left over. Do you want any? I'll just pop it in the microwave."

"Sure," said Paul.

Bruce was in the den, watching Monday night football when Paul went upstairs. "Hey," he said. "Now you're here, I'll turn this thing off. I just keep an eye on it so I can talk to people in the office," he said.

Ellie was spreading out the sketches on the table. "We can't change certain things," she said. "But we will surely make better use of space than the old cabin did."

"It was a mish-mash," said Paul. "This is an opportunity to do it right."

"The designers we talked to wanted to make it south-facing," said Bruce. "To use the southern solar advantage in the winter. But that's just not likely."

"Nope," said Paul. "The building faces the lake, with the big windows to the north. That's not really negotiable." He looked closely at the inky sketches made on paper with tiny blue squares. "I find that state law doesn't allow new buildings to be as close to the lake as the old cabin was either, so it will have to be set back a few feet. Plenty of space, though."

"We do like the idea of it being split level," said Bruce, "one side dug into the ground."

He pointed out how the two levels would work: The upper space would be designed to Bruce and Ellie's specifications, though any of the Mikkelsons could use it if the Morlands weren't there. There was a large living room, kitchen with dining area, a large bedroom and bath, with a smaller den.

"We'll put a screened-in porch on one end, for mosquito evenings," said Bruce, "and a big deck where people can sit outdoors. Maybe in the morning. The sun comes up here, doesn't it?" he pointed to the position not on the plans where the sun came up over the lake. Bruce hadn't spent as much time as the rest of them there.

Paul looked on, thrilled all of a sudden. “Yeah,” he said. “It generally comes up there.” The sun traveled quite a distance along the edge of the horizon over the course of the year. Paul usually saw it only during the summer, but now he would be able to track its movement!

“So, downstairs we’ll have in-floor radiant heating,” said Ellie. “There’ll be a large living/dining room with a small kitchen at its edge, bathroom and two large bedrooms. You could take over one of those bedrooms for your own. It would probably be big enough for an office too.”

“It’s amazing,” said Paul, “how much can be fitted in!” He was thinking of the crowded, moldy, rough space the old basement had been.

“Lots of systems needed to make a place livable all year,” said Ellie. “But it would last forever if we kept it up. Well-treated and sealed logs are excellent insulation.”

“Hot water powers the radiant heating, shared with the heating system for showers and sinks,” said Bruce.

“It’s a miracle,” said Paul. “It is so great you guys want to do this! And use the best materials!” Paul was very grateful for Bruce’s concepts. Bruce wanted to keep it basic, but use the best. Nothing extra or frivolous.

Bruce laughed. “It’ll be good for all of us. Now,” he said. “We’re not going to put in a fireplace. We’ll take the old Ben Franklin and put it upstairs in the living room. It’s more efficient than a fireplace anyway. You lose less heat.”

“We thought about a loft room,” said Ellie. “But we think it would be too expensive.”

“The main thing is to be there, in the woods, beside the lake in all that relative wilderness,” said Paul. The Paul Bunyan State Forest was mostly set aside. “Have we been coming to this lake for fifty years?” he asked Ellie.

“More than that,” said Ellie. “Those early years at the Lande cabin.” Pastor Lande was the first Lutheran pastor on the lake, convincing others to join him.

“Yeah,” said Paul. “It’s still standing, but it looks pretty shabby.”

“Do you want some ice cream, Paul,” asked Ellie, going over to the refrigerator.

“Why not!” said Paul. “It’s a celebration!”

Ellie brought out a square cardboard box full of ice cream and cut slabs off it. “Chocolate?” she asked. A plastic bottle of Hershey’s syrup appeared.

Paul sighed and squeezed chocolate on his ice cream.

“We’ll change the trust to reflect the inheritances,” Bruce said. “Each sibling is a member, with inheritance going down through their children.”

“Does that include Grace?” asked Paul. Grace was his step-daughter.

“If she’s your heir,” said Bruce.

“Definitely,” said Paul. He wasn’t used to thinking about inheritance.

“Have you stopped in at that Northern Lights casino up there in Walker?” asked Bruce, as he rinsed his bowl and put it in the dishwasher. “I’m curious.”

“I did peek in,” said Paul. “But it is such an unnatural environment, and so loud! I didn’t do more than look.” The building had opened that year, a hotel, restaurants, and a gaming location, all run by the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe.

“Looks like a nice establishment from the newspapers,” said Ellie. “The restaurants might be good.”

“More people are moving up there year round,” said Paul. “Since we started talking about this, I’ve been going to the little Laporte Lutheran church. Remember? It’s the community space for the Lutheran pastors who live on the lake. And I find that more and more people are retiring up there! It’s good timing for me!”

“Probably a result of better technology,” said Bruce. “They know how to build up there now.”

“There are trade-offs, one guy told me,” said Paul. “If he has a heart attack or a stroke, he might not make it to the hospital in time. But he’d rather end his life up there, he said, than anywhere else.”

“It makes some sense,” said Ellie. “We’re not going anywhere. St. Paul is where we want to be, but we do like the idea of spending more time at the lake. It’s so restful up there. And the grandkids are just the right age for it.” Rhonda now had two children.

Paul went downstairs to his own bed late in the evening. The apartment would always be Mother’s somehow. Paul could see her sitting in her chair by the gas fireplace on a winter’s evening. Marie too, wrapped in a shawl and lying on the sofa. It wasn’t a bad thing, Paul thought, to live with his loved ones. Time was a rather permeable membrane after all.

Before going to bed, Paul checked his emails to see whether he was missing anything. Work mostly came through emails now and he could not afford not to pay attention.

In the morning Paul was up early. He looked out on a white, cold landscape, though the sky was clear. The old trees at Ellie’s were frosted lightly with snow.

The first item of business was a calisthenics program he had made for himself, just a short program for which he didn’t need any equipment. He lifted his own body weight, the way they did in the military. Stress had made him put on weight over the years and he had been worried that his muscles were sagging. Also, Paul could not afford to let his poor, mismatched legs go. They needed tuning and use.

Starting each morning with a few minutes of stretching, pushups and other ways he was learning to lift his own weight was part of the life Paul was making for himself. He had found quite a lot of discussion of it on the web. It felt great for his upper body to be stronger, and his legs too.

Paul was at church early. He hadn’t been to choir practice that week and he was hoping someone could tell him what songs would be sung.

“Paul!” Brad Engstrom hailed him as Paul put on his blue choir robe and hung the satin collar around his neck. “Are you going to be around for a few weeks? I’ve been thinking about doing some of the *Messiah* this Christmas, and your voice would certainly be a help!”

“Yes,” said Paul. “I wanted to be here for the Christmas music, to tell you the truth.”

“Ah, good!” said Engstrom. “I’m making plans. You’ll be here for practice this week?”

Paul said that he would be. It was just as he hoped.

Gloria Dei was a more formal church than any Paul had grown up in. He processed into the church with the rest of the choir, following the pastors as the organ played, singing, “Praise to the Lord the Almighty, the King of Creation. Oh my soul praise Him for He is thy help and salvation.” Sunshine streamed in through the richly-

colored stained glass windows. At the front, on either side of the altar were the golden angels, each holding a candle, which Marie had loved so much.

Calisthenics was one thing, thought Paul, but singing from the bottom of his abdomen affected his whole body, heart, mind and soul. The powerful hymn rose up in him, both ancient and alive as he sang with the others.