

## Trip to Pownal

2015

“What am I doing?” I mumbled. It was June 8 and I was stumbling alone up a remote, icy class 4 road in Pownal Vermont. My other option was tick infested leaf litter along the roadside. I gripped the hefty stick I had found along the way, steadying myself, and hoping it would prove a good weapon if I found myself between a mother bear and her cubs. My ears were on high alert, heart pounding. But all I heard were the nattering bluejays flitting above my head. “What the hell am I doing??” I yelled up at them.

I was taking three precious days off from my busy life to try and find my one of my brother David’s many dreams, the cabin he had partly built, then sold almost 50 years before high up this mountain side. I had finally decided to let myself be pulled there.

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When he started the cabin in 1969 I was a freshman in college. He was newly married to his second wife Wendy, a cabin dream fan, and our family adored her. I started out thinking of her as “older”, married to my big brother, but we are the same age, 10 years younger than David. She was smart and upbeat, ready with a laugh, just starting at Bennington College and learning how to be a wife.

I visited them in Pownal that first winter. Wendy met me at the bus station in Bennington and we drove down Rt 7 through a snowy landscape past the Green Mountain Race Track, turning off onto a series of narrower and narrower roads, and finally onto a winding dirt track through thick woods that climbed a seemingly endless hill. She pulled into a rough, clearing. “Now we walk. I’m so glad you’re here!” Wendy said. Passing under gigantic transmission lines we trudged along chatting, then arrived at the cabin site where David was working within the post and beam frame on a rickety ladder putting up rafters. He gave me a hug and a kiss on the forehead, then showed me around, pointing out the steep slope where the cabin frame perched, a small stream flowing right underneath it. He mused about how poetic it would be to share this spot with a brook, which he envisioned sweetly burbling under the cabin on its way down hill. Their 3 dogs crowded around me for ear rubs.

Wendy showed me their temporary dwelling, an 8'14' 2 room home-made trailer deeper in the woods. After dinner we sat around a tiny propane heater and David laughed out loud describing a recent frigid late night slog up the trail when his blue jeans had not protected him very well. "I froze my balls!!" The cabin smelled of fumes. That night I was cold and restless in my sleeping bag, wakened first by the groans of the newly weds making love on the other side of a paper thin beaverboard wall, intensely embarrassing for me, and then by a sawing crunching sound coming from somewhere under the trailer. David later explained: a porcupine was chewing holes in the trailer every night. I was relieved to escape the musty trailer in the morning and was a little jealous of the warmth David and Wendy got from the 3 dogs that shared their bed.

I think I visited again, but lost track of whether they ever set up housekeeping there since their marriage fell apart so quickly, breaking many hearts in our family. David moved on to the next wife, #3 out of 4, plus a few girlfriends. Lots of women thought they could save him. I would make sure not to get attached to the rest.

So in 2015, with Tony away on a trip to Ireland and our kids grown and gone, I had time for my adventure into the past. At home I had pored over satellite views on Google Maps and a Vermont Geological Survey(USGS) map I bought at Capitol Stationers to try and find the area, but I couldn't remember any road names and failed miserably trying to drive in my mind from Bennington to the mountain in Pownal. Was it a left off Rte 7, or a right? I could remember land marks, the racetrack, the electric transmission line, but direction and distances were a mystery.

My first stop would have to be the Pownal Town Clerk. In less than hour she had done the title search and I had the name of the current owner, a simple plot map of the area with the property outlined in yellow hi-lighter, and copies of 4 deeds. It was easy because the owner, Peter Lindley seemed to be the son of the couple who had bought the property from David and Wendy. The deeds gave me a clear idea of the time line: David and Wendy had bought the land in 1969 and gotten divorced in 1971. David then transferred the property to Wendy and she sold it to the Lindleys in 1980.

I spent the rest of the evening on my bed in the hotel room studying maps. Google Maps Satellite View on my computer showed a possible clue, a tiny glint of metal in a sea of trees.

Early the next morning I drove the route to the land, making one wrong turn after another. Paved roads changed to dirt, and houses thinned out as I drove up an increasingly winding and rutted road that seemed to be the right one. At a sharp switch back I pulled off into a log landing and parked, afraid of not being able to turn my Subaru around if I drove further. I wrote a quick note explaining my mission in case I was trespassing and put it under the wiper blade, donned my backpack and set off on foot.

The woods had that freshly unfurled green look of springtime. It had been rainy the night before and everything was damp and glittery. I felt decidedly isolated and a bit nervous, especially when the road became icy, not something I had expected. The USGS map showed I was now at over 2100 feet in elevation, explaining the drop in temperature. I had some pictures of the cabin with me from my 1969 trip that showed a plywood deck with the beginnings of a single story post and beam frame. I kept the plot map out and tracked my location by the buildings I passed, a sprinkling of small hunting camps, but none of them looked like David's. I took comfort in being close to "civilization", as I knew my route would go off-road eventually.

Then a pickup truck interrupted my private thoughts as it bumped up the hill. The driver and I waved, the way Vermonters do. In a few minutes I saw the truck parked at a camp, the driver unloading boxes as I approached. He might be a hunter, might know that land ahead. He said he was finally installing solar panels but was waiting for a friend to come help and had time for a few questions. "You know, there is a cabin way up there towards the top of the hill. It's in a wet area and juts out where the hill falls away to the south, looks abandoned. I wonder if that's it." I resumed my odyssey armed with helpful tips: turn by the clump of birches, careful of the washed out stretch of trail - gets bad further up.

I had been walking almost a mile uphill since I left the car. Had I turned onto the right trail? I slowed down to peer into the woods on either side. Just as I was losing hope I saw an opening off the trail almost hidden in the undergrowth, then a rusty gate and some fencing dotted with NO TRESPASSING signs. Through the shadows there was something man made. As I waded through the brush there it was, a building. This was it!! Maybe?

The dirt colored cabin stood surrounded by maple beech and birch trees. I found a rock (tick free) to sit on and dug into my backpack for the pictures. This cabin had the right roof line, but it seemed broken in the middle with a pronounced sag. I didn't recognize the porch. I

ate a banana. I honestly had no idea what memories I had of the cabin. Had I ever seen it finished? Or were my memories just from David and Wendy's vivid descriptions?

I donated the banana peel to the leaf litter and approached the cabin, but ran into a series of 3 foot deep 5 foot wide mud filled trenches ringing it like a moat. Skirting them, I wacked my head on a guy wire that stretched from the cabin to a large tree 30 feet away, then ducked under 2 more. The roof was alarmingly out of plumb and level, but the cabin was somehow intact, with padlocked doors. I peered through dirty windows and saw building materials, coils of guy wire and one green rocking chair. To my relief the rafters matched the faded picture in my hand. This really was it. Who would hear me "WOOHOO!"? No one. Exploring further I found no evidence of the trailer. I crouched in the bushes for a pee, then wandered around taking pictures with my phone. I circled the cabin a few times, drinking in the feel of satisfaction that this had not been a ridiculous mission after all.

I went back to my rock and munched some trail mix, then set off back down the hill, now more muddy than icy as the sun broke through the clouds. So the cabin was still standing. Wow. Why was there so much evidence of someone trying to save it but with no sign of any comforts other than one chair? I realized I was exhausted and longing for a hot shower.

Back at the hotel after my shower and a nap I decided I was ready to phone Peter Lindley. I dreaded leaving the voice mail, expecting he'd never call back. I'm really bad at leaving a second message, not wanting to be a bother people, but this moment carried some weight and I needed the sound of his voice to help with some closure. I was so relieved when he called back in an hour. He told me how his parents had bought the land with an abandoned cabin on it which they rehabbed and expanded, saving it from falling down. They added a new road that was easier to drive up, but only in summer. They brought Peter and his siblings up there on weekends since they lived nearby, and he had fond memories of playing in the woods in this remote spot, cool and quiet in the heat of summer. He inherited the cabin and now mainly went up there to continue the battle with nature and physics, fixing guy wires and digging deeper trenches. There was simply no solid ground for a foundation under the cabin. I gave him some perspective about the builder of this cabin, the dreamer aspect of this planning and execution, or lack there of. Closure, there was a glimmer.

I packed up early the next morning, starting to focus forward to my trip home, planning a stop at my favorite breakfast place in Manchester, the Little Rooster Cafe, and went to the hotel desk to check out. The clerk took my room key and printed me out a receipt while I

rambled a bit to him about my mission in the area, how I had been up in the wilds north of County Rd near the transmission line. He stopped and looked at me. "I own a cabin up there." "Really?" I said, "What is your name?" It wasn't like I could tell him a street address. My heart raced a little. "Peter Lindley" he said and we both broke into laughter. What were the odds? He was the part time overnight clerk at the hotel. We exchanged email addresses and he promised to answer any questions I had when I got home. When I asked Peter how long he could hold off the forces of nature, he looked at the floor and slowly shook his head, chuckling.

On my breakfast stop at the Little Rooster, I ruminated. So David's cabin had survived thanks to the dedication of the next generation of dreamers. His dream staggered on. So many of the rest of them were long gone, the 2 goat farms, the vegetable farm, the row boat building business, the book about irrigation using dew, the folding sawbucks that he tried to sell to LL Bean. He says they stole the idea after declining to buy them. Oh and the two 30 foot sailboats, or was it three? His published novel, "The Sidelong Glances of a Pigeon Kicker" lives on and while back I discovered a tiny fan base on the Amazon entry for the used book. The book's Indie movie contract and advance had funded the cabin plan. A second novel ended up in his wood stove after his editor gave him his first notes.

I was 48 when he died in 1999 of an alcoholism related pulmonary embolism at age 58. He had been self treating his schizophrenia with quart jars of vodka and 3 daily packs of Camel unfiltered cigarettes for a long time. He had always been in my head - brilliant, inspiring, fun at first, drunk, troubled, volatile later on. I turned my back on him towards the end - I had to. My husband had been good at helping me build emotional barriers that made the nightmares recede. Now I was finally past the worst of the haunting - I finally could watch that movie or read that book without crying, the one about the family with the damaged person who sucks so much energy out of everyone. My older sister Linda has padlocked her memories of David, no matter how many questions I ask. "Oh Jen, I simply DON'T remember any of it!" I stopped asking.

Now I imagine a life on that mountainside with fresh perspective, what it would have been like to live up there so far from town roads, with a long stretch of driveway constantly reverting to stream status. I see the irony of having a huge electric transmission line so close, but no actual power available. I wonder if you could have put in a septic system, and guess it was all too wet up there. But the main problem had been that steep mountainside which politely refused the offer of a dwelling on its slope, shaking it off in slow, slow motion. David

had made a pretty good building, the first of several he built in his life, self taught with the help of Audell's Building Guide. He had just picked the absolute wrong place. A crazy place, a place with no solid ground. I will always wonder how he felt when his dream failed so badly, but that wondering comes from my own practical mind. David was on to the next woman the next dream.