

# His private Christmas shared

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GEORGE VUKELICH'S

## North Country NOTEBOOK

One moment he was seeing the terrifying crash of cars at the familiar rainswept intersection and the next moment he was aware that he was awake in the fluffy down bag, his face cool in the morning chill of the cabin, his ears ringing in the silence.

When the dream first came, when it came the first few times, he was sure that he had screamed in it. He was also sure that he had heard himself screaming as he awoke, sweating and shaking and fearful. Fearful.

Now, after months of the dream, it didn't always come every night and when it did, he had a sense that it was a dream and he didn't scream that panicky scream anymore. And he didn't wake up sweating or shaking as much anymore.

He wasn't as fearful anymore in the first waking moments either because all of a sudden he knew where he was and there would be that isolated, empty feeling, but it wasn't fear.

God, the mind is a funny thing. He hadn't seen the crash, of course. No one had. Except possibly, Mary and little Ricky. And the other driver.

But there the crash was, running and running again in his dream like some film strip on an endless loop.

His mind went back there, hovered there, explored there, he knew, in the hope of catching some last glimpse of them, his wife and child, some last vision of them alive.

He rubbed his eyes a stretched and unzipped himself out of the toasty bag.

The moving air washed over his body in cold waves. He put on two pair of wool socks, the thermal underwear, the wool pants, the turtleneck. Then he quick-laced himself into the Sorel boots and stood up. He was warm and toasty again.

He walked to the window overlooking the lake. The heavy snow of last night had stopped, his ski track in from the road was gone and the creamy surface glittered in the winter sunlight. It was unbroken, untouched. As if no man had ever walked here at all.

The thought made him feel good all the while he built a blaze back

up in the fireplace, stacking in liberally the blessed birch logs. Pine knots for body, he told himself. The birch for flavor. He waited a few moments as the unlocked energy crackled and flowed and moved into the room like life itself.

Untouched, he thought again. That was why he had come. Three miles away, the car was probably drifted over like some glacial outcropping and he smiled at the secure feeling that gave him. Hell. He had food. Brandy and Scotch. He had wood enough, wood to burn, without skimping. And in about three shakes he would have water. He took the two five-gallon plastic pails, opened the door and stepped out into the sparkling pine-frosted morning.

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Mary had loved the cabin at first sight.

It was primitive and no mistake. The outdoor john was tucked discreetly out of sight, except for a rakish roofline, on a gentle slope planted to an army of Scotch pine. The outdoor water supply was even further away and even higher up in the rock spring out of which tumbled a flow clean and cold enough to sustain brook trout. And the cabin itself, being three miles from the nearest highline, was illuminated mostly by sunlight, moonlight and two kerosene lamps that Mr. Olson threw into the deal as "housewarming" presents for Mary.

"It's a nice place to visit," she had said after tramping back from the john one downpouring August night, "but I wouldn't want to live here."

It was later that night as they played cards with Ricky and even had the fireplace going that she had stared into the flames.

"I wonder," she had said, "what this must be like in winter."

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The spring was open as he knew it would be. Diminished from summer, but open. Alive and running.

As he scooped in the first pail,

there was movement in the waxy green balsam branches.

A pair of black-capped chickadees fluttered and fussed in the boughs just as they had done last summer. For a brief moment, he wanted to laugh with them because they seem so joyful. And then for a longer moment, he had to cry.

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Ricky had caught the bluegills off the dock and stopped at twenty-five because the small ones, filleted, were a meal for the three of them. He cleaned them while Ricky watched and pestered to use the razor sharp filet knife.

Next year, he had promised Ricky. Next year.

The trees around them were alive with birds that morning. Flashing cardinals. Headstanding nuthatches. Fussing little chickadees.

They rinsed off the fillets and cleaned up the area and buried all the guts and heads.

Outside the cabin, Ricky noticed that the Mason jar feeder was empty except for a pool of hulls that a chipmunk was doublechecking.

"I better put some more sunflower seeds out," Ricky said. He unhooked the jar and headed for the garage where the 50-pound bag sat in the corner.

"I wonder," he had said, "who feeds them in the wintertime."

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As the water boiled for coffee and the frying pan was heating up

he knew it was going to be all right. Everybody had told him not be alone at Christmastime, to be with friends. But he didn't really trust himself with friends this first Christmas and he did trust himself here.

He thought of the shopping malls back home and the traffic and the dirty snow and he knew it was going to be all right. There wouldn't be a tree this year. And there wouldn't be presents. But it was going to be all right here.

He stared at the barren bird feeding area where the Mason jar hung.

First thing after breakfast, he thought, I'll ski into town for some sunflower seeds. The thought of the fluttering fussy little birds discovering a trove of goodies made him smile.

Damn right, he told himself as he poured the coffee.

It's going to be all right.