

Growing Up By Tearing Down

A memoir by Paul Wozney

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What began as another boyhood day would become a rite of passage. Shuffling around my yard with my sisters and neighbour pals, we were used to hearing the roar of chainsaws, clanking excavators and the dull thumping of backhoes that were working to clear lots on the street being developed beyond the green belt in our backyard. Today, however, would bring their work to the doorstep of my childhood, and a sunny afternoon somehow seemed ominous when a knock came at our door at lunch and a worker asked my Dad who owned the log cabin in the woods.

My sisters were shoed out to the driveway with their bikes and roller skates, and my Dad and I went with the crew as I listened to them explaining that the cabin was in the way of them digging the hole for a foundation, that they needed to start today and that it had to move or get knocked down.

My ears and face were hot and I couldn't say a word, but my Dad asked if there was anything they could do to save it. They stood for a moment, when one of the guys suggested they try to lift and relocate it with some cargo straps and the backhoe. They sprang into action, four men buzzing around my kid sized, treehouse-ish log cabin. I'd built it with my own, nine-year-old hands, hauling sixteen-foot long chunks of downed spruce and pine trees a few hundred feet through the woods at the back of my house. The product of splinters, bark-scraped scabs on my arms and legs and sides, the two one inch white stripe scars along the length of my left index finger from the to-the-shocking-white-bone gash from the orange bow saw my Dad let me use to cut the logs.

As I watched the bucket of the backhoe rise, heard the straps snap tight and my log cabin groan and creak as it lifted into the air, I saw in the space between the walls hanging in air and the dirt where it had sat moments before a clear divide, a gap that could not be filled any longer. My crowning childhood achievement hung precariously in the air. The glory and realization of a nine-year-old imagination, starting to twist and spin like a kid whose friends have spun them in circles on a playground swing and let go.

And as it started to spin, it started to come apart. The roof cracked. The door frame split, and the logs popped loose from their joints at the corners of the walls, tumbling to the ground. The same sticky pitch that glued my fingers together when I built it wasn't anywhere near strong enough to keep it together; it stung my nostrils as the logs fell, thudding to the ground, bark covered jenga blocks pushed one move too many.

The backhoe shut off its clackety diesel engine, and its bucket hung over the crazy pile with straps dangling, the arms of a rescue worker swaying, helplessly watching the victim slip out of grip and down the face of the mountain. The workmen stood staring at me, hands on my hips, looking apologetically at the mess. The scene was silent for a long moment, like we'd seen a good friend pass away.

In a way, one had. Grade six and seven were nightmarish. School was a black hole of torment and humiliation. The street in front of my house used to be a road hockey rink of equals between neighbourhood kids, so anyone with a stick got a chance to play and the common courtesy of being on someone's team. Now it was empty, with so many having more important things to do like smoke with their buddies or hang out at the corner store. That cabin had been a place for me to belong, to be the master of a world where I provided safe haven for the imagination of others. We'd assaulted fortresses, pioneered communities in the wild, staged wild shootouts with lawmen and lawbreakers through the gaps in the logs. I wasn't a loser there. I was worthwhile, a partner, teammate, someone to lean on and help out.



Those identities were now laid out on the forest floor, matchsticks dropped, about to be swept up so that bigger plans didn't trip. The pride of childhood laid low so a developer could sell some adult the pride of home ownership. It hurt- the same heat I'd felt gashing my finger to the bone with the bow saw I'd trimmed those logs with ran through me from head to toe, and momentarily I wanted to be furious with them for ruining my cabin. But I realized that my childhood- dealing with my problems by playing, was already past, escaped for some time and putting distance between us with every day.

I knew that they could have knocked it all down in five minutes and been completely within their rights. I'd built that cabin on space I had no right to claim forever. Rather than shake my fist at the workers, I walked over and shook their hands, looked them in their surprised eyes and thanked them each for how hard they'd tried to help me save my project.

They moved on to their work of clearing the lot behind my house, and I turned my back on that pile of precious logs. Hearing urgent cries for help from the front yard, I ran quickly to see what was wrong. Surveying the scene, I helped my baby sister turn her bicycle, the one with the lavender paint job and fluffy tassels sticking out the ends of her handlebars, right side up so she could chase down the "robbers" and free our street of crime.

And then, I was a teenager.