

On leaving the woods:

It's a melancholy morning here in the oaks and cherry. Oh, it's not that the trees are in any way different from their usual state. No, they don't change much from day to day. I suppose if they did they wouldn't be trees. It's me. I'm the one feeling the twinge of sadness. It's my last day here, the last day that I walk through and around the trees as if they were members of my very large family bustling in a very small kitchen. It's close back in these woods, dense and diffusely lit. Comforting and lovely.

We're headed for higher ground out to the farm where the land rolls away from you, where the land follows its own logic all the way to the horizon. We are leaving the canopy and heading for the sky. I am watching a blue jay clearing all the other birds off a feeder. He's young and full of himself and he thinks that he can eat all the seed in there. He can't and he won't but his nature tells him to clear away the others nonetheless. That's the way it goes in the woods. Things have their own immutable rhythm and pace. The rules are the rules and they're not the rules of humans.

These past few years in the woods have left so many impressions, have taught me so many lessons that it's difficult to separate them from each other. They have combined to produce a general feeling of well being and peace. My collected experiences in the woods form a seamless cloth and every event of these years is draped in it. I came into them wondering what the next few months would bring and I leave having found it. We are headed for the next adventure on the land.

I have decided to leave the tree house where it sits, high in the biggest oak. You may remember that the tree house was my occasional refuge after certain unforgivable transgressions. I hope that the Angels, Pearl and Ruby, will be kind enough to let me climb back into it every now and again when I need a forest fix. I'll be quiet and stay only for a short while. It will be good to sit there again, good to be in the dappled light of an autumn afternoon.

I remember one such afternoon when I was felling an old elm, one of the many that the monster Dutch Elm has left standing but lifeless in these woods. I had made all my calculations, carefully charted the line of its fall, and knew exactly what would happen as I made the final cut. Apparently I forgot to tell the elm about my plan. That tree

twisted, shivered and decided to fall towards me. As I scrambled along my predetermined escape route (always have a way to run) it tore the sleeve of my shirt from shoulder to wrist and smashed my toolbox to smithereens. Deep breath, stupid smile, shake of the head and start turning the old darling into firewood.

I cut a path through the woods, just a trail to walk without having to work too hard, a route where the walker can look up and around instead of down. It was not my intention at all but the local deer have decided that they enjoy an easier road too. I see them regularly on their morning rounds ambling down my path in their easy browsers' gait. Makes me feel good that the animals like my work.

I probably won't see Chauncey again. Even when both of us were out in the woods almost every day our meetings were infrequent. I'll miss his insights and more than that, his sometimes roundabout way of delivering them. Someday, I'd like to be as smart as Chauncey is. I'll keep working at it. And if you see him before I do, say 'hey for me and remember to listen to what he says. It's worth the effort.

I shouldn't get started thinking about the folks I will miss. I get a little choked when I imagine their bright smiles and Minnesota cadence. In my short time here I have met the finest people, the most genuine souls, and the kindest hearts that I have ever met in my life. I know I'll see you all again but it will have to be planned and stuck to and that is so different from bumping into you on the road. Know that you made my day every time we met.

Well, I'd better wrap this up. Readers will forgive only so much sap. I am looking forward to talking with you all in future editions of the Banner. Take good care of yourselves, don't push too hard and remember to leave a light on for me.