



My Uncle Paul

MARGARET NELSON

Somewhere in the mists and fogs that enveloped my earliest childhood and continued well into my later years I must have known my Uncle Paul. I was certainly aware that he existed through family talk and gossip if nothing else, but I really do not remember seeing him or visiting him till 1946 when I would have been twenty-eight years old.

I was born in Winthrop, Minnesota, January 4, 1918, the daughter of Ethel Corey Erickson, Paul's sister, and by the time we moved back to Iowa, when I was a year old, Paul and Grandma Corey were living in Atlantic, quite a horse-and-buggy drive from where we had settled on a farm north of Marne. Then, in 1921, Paul and Grandma moved to Iowa City so that he could attend college.

I do remember going into Atlantic to visit Grandma. I ate a pear—my first—and how good it was! I also was taken to an ice-cream parlor for a treat. And I saw a squirrel. But I cannot recall seeing Paul. Since he was more than fourteen years older than I, he probably was not much interested in a small girl. And he was too young, I'm sure, to be curious as to my "Corey" characteristics, if there were any. Long afterward Paul told me that he had called me "Mart," so he must have known and liked me. But he nearly always referred to me as Margaret—if he referred to me at all.

Paul must have been present at Grandma Corey's funeral in 1925. I would have been seven. I do remember going to her funeral, but I do not have any memory of Paul's being there. In 1929, after a trip to Europe, Paul came back to the midwest to retrieve his belongings. But I do not have a memory of that, nor do I recall his stopping in Van Wert, where we were then

living, in 1935 while on his way west to visit his sister Elizabeth (“Bachelor Bess”) on her drought-stricken “ranch” in western South Dakota.

What can I say? At family gatherings I was simply a lot more interested in my cousins than I was in their parents. It always behooved me to make myself scarce at such functions because, as the oldest girl, I seemed always to be commandeered to watch the younger children. So I never hung around adults. Also, when Paul made his 1935 stop in Van Wert, I was working from seven in the morning until ten and even eleven at night as a hired girl for a family that owned a produce and trucking business. If I did see Paul, it was likely for a mere “hello” and “goodbye.”

I did have perceptions about Uncle Paul, of course, many of them gleaned from overheard conversations between my mother and Aunt Lilah, Uncle Rob Corey’s wife, who were on the same rural telephone party line (often joined by “Central,” the Marne switchboard operator). And because we kids slept in the same room as our parents, I overheard a lot of “pillow talk.” So I knew that Uncle Paul was a writer, that he had lived in Chicago and New York, and that he had then gone to Europe. Such knowledge helped me nail down some bragging rights at school!

I was more than a little awed by the “great man” of the family, enough so that I wanted to be a writer too, although this ambition may have stemmed from my passion for reading. As a child I read anything I could get my hands on, and I dreamed of writing books—and of the untold fame and money I should derive from that occupation.

Growing up, I was just barely aware of the exchange of letters between Paul and my mother, but I was aware of the gist of what the letters contained because it was a Corey custom to read the letters from family members, then append further remarks and send both letters on to another family member. Apparently my mother sent many of her letters to her older brother Fuller and his wife Threes, because their son Gilbert eventually came into possession of them.

I think my mother was a bit intimidated by Paul's education. She always wrote a first draft of her letters to him, using the backs of paper sacks or lengths of brown wrapping paper. When she was satisfied, she would copy the letter onto more acceptable stationery and mail it. She kept her original drafts, and after her death, and Dad's, these came to me.

How many of my perceptions of my Uncle Paul must have been gleaned from rereading these old letters? How many were gleaned from overheard conversations? How many derived from my own experiences? The answers to those questions are not clear to me even now.

When Grandma and Paul moved to Atlantic, she sold the family farm to my Uncle Rob and bought herself a house in town. Paul was close to the farm and when he visited Iowa, it was to the farm that he always went. He explained why in a letter (January 18, 1926) to my mother: "I think you have always realized why I spent most of my time at Rob's when I was in western Iowa. That place will always in actuality be Home to me. The force exerted by the environment of the first fourteen years of my life on the Home Place means much to me, it has shaped my life and I'm sure that you can't help realizing what wandering over the old farm means to me." In the same letter Paul commented on the inevitable squabbles that had erupted after it was known that he had inherited the house in Atlantic, but he was determined to keep out of them: "You know, Sis, Mother sacrificed her life for that money, and I don't propose to mix my finger in it unless it can be settled with supreme calmness and quietude. I shall keep in touch with you, Sister, and perhaps we can eliminate the difficulties. Remember I am backing you in everything and will do all I can to help you."

At that moment, Paul said, he was interested in one thing only: writing his novels and getting them published. Later in 1926 (September 21) he wrote to tell my mother how happy he was that the estate seemed to be nearing settlement, and he added a significant personal note: "My affairs of the heart are progressing as usual with a slight happier ovation breaking into

existence within the last three or four weeks." This was his way of introducing Ruth Lechlitner, whom he described as "a mighty decent sort [who] smokes, drinks and all that sort of thing"—words calculated to shock my very conservative mother—as well as "remarkably brilliant and somewhat recognized over the country as a poet. I think she is quite falling in love with me."

After the estate was settled, Ethel and Paul continued to correspond. They differed greatly in their philosophies of life, and this contrast showed up in their letters. Paul liked to tweak the tails of the Methodist Victorian lions back home and, at age twenty-four, wished to appear as a well-educated man of the world, one who had suffered the highs and lows of life. My mother, seven years his senior, thought him a brash kid brother with high faluting ways. Paul wanted it known that even at his tender age he had had more varied experiences than any of the family, had known women who varied from prostitutes to the most cultured in America, had been thrown among "homosexuals and worse," was familiar with houses where a hundred men, women, and children lived in three stories as well as with a man who had refused the presidency of U.S. Steel. When he wrote that his midwestern relatives could not possibly know what it would be like to live on a bowl of soup a day in the middle of a million well-fed people, Ethel countered by sending him a package of "eats." He thanked her profusely: "Ruth went into ecstasies over the bread and we were all in seventh heaven over the pie."

A main point of contention was their religious differences, my mother being very devout and Paul professing to be an atheist. Another was Ethel's growing family. He remarks, "I'm disgustingly eager to hear what this 'red hot' news is you have to tell me so send it right along to the same old address. I imagine it's another prospective nephew or niece but I have hopes for something better. You know, I'm not so bally hot on this kid stuff. I'm glad you've got a bouncing family and all that, but for heaven's sake do shut off the nativity spigot and give the ones you've got a bloody good chance."

Before sending this letter on to other family members, my mother wrote a note on the back: "I thought first I'd put you and Emily wise and then write and tell [Paul] I had twins."

Paul and Ruth, married, sailed for France, and more letters came, relating their adventures. In 1929 they returned to America and settled along the Hudson near New York City. Our family, still growing, moved to Van Wert in Decatur County, Iowa, beginning the decline into the Depression years from which my mother would never emerge. Ethel Corey Erickson died of cancer on May 22, 1936—one week before I graduated from high school.

I sent Paul a graduation announcement and in return he sent me a fountain pen and pencil set and a year's subscription to a socialist magazine. When I thanked him, I told him of my plan to attend the University of Minnesota. Paul, who had not been able to attend his sister's funeral, wrote me an affectionate letter. It read, in part: "Tears at funerals may mean much to the neighbors, but the real thing is never to forget your mother. As long as you live you should hold vivid in your mind the memory of her dynamic and upright character—that is the great thing. . . . Minnesota has as good a University as Iowa, and if you can find advantages of living there, then drive ahead." He knew some "people of influence" in the area, he said, and would gladly pull some wires to help me find work, if I wished him to. I didn't answer his letter. And oh, how I wish that I had! If I had, I might have finished college!

In 1940 my friends Rilma and Ruth Rogers gave me Paul's first published novel, *Three Miles Square*, for Christmas. Another friend allowed me to read his copy of *The Road Returns* and I was able to purchase *County Seat* myself. I enjoyed the books immensely and was unable to lay them aside until they were read. I and everyone I knew were raised in families whose roots were firmly embedded in Victorian mores. I had doubts about Paul's rather graphic prose appealing to the genteel sensibilities of most of my acquaintances and in particular to my relatives. My great aunt Rachel in Atlantic wrote me: "So you like *The Road Returns*. I have never read it and am not

planning on doing so. I read *Three Miles Square* and that was enough." Some of the family thought Paul must be a Communist.

A few years later I had my first remembered encounter with Uncle Paul. It was during the spring of 1946. I was twenty-eight and working in Des Moines when he and a friend stopped there en route to California to check locations preparatory to moving west. Afterward, Paul wrote a short story about this incident, a story that didn't sell and that he, sometime later, sent to me as a gift. He had written across the title page: "Margaret—this is a story I was unable to place. I'm giving it to you because you will probably recall the incident. It will give you an idea of how material is manipulated to get a story. In this case it didn't come off." The title of the story is preceded by this note:

For an evening she made him feel young
again although he was only her
Uncle Roger
by
Paul Corey

He had written of a "middle-aged man with thinning, slightly greying hair" who had contacted a niece whom he hadn't seen in ten years, while on his way to California. She wouldn't believe at first that he was who he said he was when he telephoned her. He couldn't recall the names of her brothers and sisters, and it was too painful to identify himself by reference to his sister Ethel, who had died nine years earlier. He felt perhaps he should have slipped through Iowa to the Coast without being reminded of things and people that fixed his age. Eventually, the girl acknowledged him as her uncle and agreed to meet him at his hotel. He continued to reminisce while showering and shaving. It was fifteen years ago, when he was just thirty, married two years, and on his first vacation that he had first seen her. He remembered "Sally" as being dark, chunky, and a little awkward. The story recounts Roger and Sally's dinner in Des Moines, at Younker's Tea Room. Sally then showed him around the old Art Center, at that time

located in a loft on Walnut Street, and then she took him home to meet her roommates, who were thrilled to meet a “celebrity.” He followed the facts closely.

The story made it clear to me that Uncle Paul cared for me and was concerned for my well being. Had I been even remotely aware of this when I attempted college, I probably would have availed myself of the help he had offered, and perhaps been able to complete my Journalism major instead of being compelled to leave school for lack of money. But Uncle Paul was the “great man” of the family, and I was much too shy and insecure to presume on the relationship.

Many years were to pass before Paul and I would meet again. In August of 1974 I planned a trip to the San Francisco area, not far from Sonoma, where Paul and Ruth had settled. We wanted to see them, to stay over if that was possible. He agreed to meet us at the bus stop in Santa Rosa, keep us for a day or two, then return us to Santa Rosa to continue our bus trip up the coast.

I was entranced with the home Paul had built with his own hands on a marvelous site—a mountainside overlooking the Valley of the Moon. We sat on his deck that first day, sipping wine, awaiting evening, looking way down the valley toward San Francisco, watching the lights come on at dusk. As we watched the misty outline of Mt. Tamalpais, I asked Paul how he had found such a site. He said that he had learned what to look for. The road up to the house was very steep, the heavily-treed mountain falling away from it on both sides. In an enclosure on one side, a neighbor kept horses. In a small patch on the other side, Paul raised tomatoes. Ruth, already somewhat crippled with arthritis, was using a walker to get around, but despite this she fixed our meals, with small help from me, torn between my immersion in the beauty of the place and my compulsion to question Paul about the family history that was becoming important to me: my mother, grandmother, great-grandparents, anything he could tell me about the Co-veys seemed valuable.

Following this visit, I began sending Paul batches of my home-made molasses cookies for Christmas. They were made

according to a recipe of my great aunt Hattie's. She had occasionally sent us a five-gallon lard can stuffed with those cookies when we were kids on the farm. "What a treat, Wow!" wrote Paul after receiving the first cookies in December 1974. "Those cookies took me way back. . . . Talk about nostalgia—I haven't recalled anything quite so poignantly in years." He had, he said, once published a story called "Aunt Birdie's Cookies" based on Aunt Hattie's treats.

We began a regular correspondence which lasted the rest of Paul's life and made him more of a confiding friend than the rather distant figure he had been for so long. One thing that emerged was Paul's deep love of cats, any cats, domestic or wild. One of his first letters after our visit to Sonoma told of his visits to mountain-lion country, where he helped to rescue a 108 pound, seven-foot cat from a well into which he had fallen. After an eighteen-hour effort, the cat was retrieved from the well, but to no avail. Even with mouth-to-nose resuscitation he could not be revived. Paul was involved in a long fight with the Fish and Game Department, attempting a protection program for the mountain lion. As he put it in his letter, "The Fish and Game Department want to reverse the pattern of the Romans and throw the lions to the Christians. Well they aren't going to manage it without a hell of a fight from this cat." Paul and his friends did manage to get a moratorium on the killing of the lions for five years, but there were too many loopholes and a dozen or more of the big cats were killed. In 1987 he was discouraged: "They did the mountain lion dirt just as I figured. At least 80% of the people of California want the mountain lion left alone or protected just as we had been doing, yet the commission voted 3-2 to turn them over to the trophy hunters." He blamed the powerful gun lobby and the money it could pour into political campaigns.

At home he had more control, and his ranch was rife with cats, the more the better. In a typical letter he writes: "The Pet Population Control called me and said they had a red tabby who had to have a home or would be 'put down.' He was

hungry and dirty. They cleaned him up—got him shots, neutered and defleaed him and now we have a new cat.”

I know it to be a scientific and clinical fact that men can assume the role of caregiver, but I always marvel when they do so. I am reduced to a quivering emotional meltdown when I am confronted with examples. But, for fifteen years before she died, Paul cared for Ruth, usually alone, sometimes with a once-a-week helper. Of course, we had noted Ruth’s deteriorating condition during our 1974 visit. Her problems multiplied. By 1977 she was suffering from disintegration of her spinal discs, then she developed cataracts, then she fell and broke the femur in her right leg. Hospitalization became commonplace. A month out of the hospital for the broken leg, Ruth fell again, breaking her left arm at the shoulder. This put Paul into the category of a twenty-four-hour attendant, besides acting as housekeeper, cook, and coordinator of visitations on the invalid. As Ruth graduated from wheelchair to walker, Paul’s caring duties eased up some, and by New Year’s she was up and able to watch the Rosebowl game on the tube while Paul baked a ham. Three days later she fell and broke her right knee.

Ruth’s physical ailments became routine, but what bothered Uncle Paul the most was that his wife, a brilliant woman and fine poet, was by 1985 deteriorating mentally. “Last night we watched King John on the tube,” he wrote, “and she asked who wrote it. If we don’t see friends every week or ten days she forgets completely who they are, and it is hard for her to read a story and remember the story line. I try to get her books that are a bit episodic so that she only needs to keep track of the moment.” Physical recuperation seemed possible, mental recovery less so, although Paul clung to every shred of hope. In 1988 he reported: “Ruth shows a bit of improvement especially after a good night’s sleep. She can wake up in the morning and know what day it is and what usually happens on that particular day. But by noon she has begun to say that she doesn’t know what she is doing and wants me to tell her what/how to proceed. Then I have to yell at her that she DOES

know what she is supposed to do next and get on with doing it. I have the feeling that if I were to start giving her step-by-step directions as she seems to want, I would be doing it continually like manipulating an automaton."

Now Paul was tied down almost totally. He could sometimes get away for an hour or so with confidence that Ruth was not going anywhere, and that gave him the opportunity for a hike up the mountainside, something which at age eighty-five he still enjoyed, but Ruth did not like being left alone. He felt that his writing days were done, except for a short stint at the typewriter doing letters. "It wouldn't be so bad if her memory hadn't gone," he confided. "It's hard for me to comprehend what a person's life is like who can't remember longer than 15/20 minutes." Ruth died in November of 1989. I wished I had known her better; she must have been a rare and gifted person to have elicited the glowing tributes that poured out from so many talented people on her death. I had a few memories, one being the time one of the Corey cats had presented her with a bat. He had been instructed not to kill birds, but she said the cat had laid the bat before her with a look of wonderment on its face, as if to ask, "Ma, is it a bird or a mouse?"

In 1990 Paul fell out of a tree (he was trimming the fronds on his palm) and broke five ribs. The next day he went into the hospital and remained for three weeks, two of them in intensive care. We were eager to see him again before it was too late and so took special pains later that year to get him to our annual Labor Day family reunion in Des Moines. He had come just once, in 1975, when Ruth's trip to Hawaii to visit their daughter, Anne, had left him with free time. He had enjoyed this, as had we, but repeat visits became impossible with Ruth's invalidism.

But in 1990 Paul was able to fly to Iowa with Anne, to visit the homeplace near Marne, where all the Corey children had been raised, and then come on to Des Moines. My sisters were all in town, the Ohio contingent had arrived, and even though Mother Nature was uncooperative—we had a misty rain on picnic day—there were eighty-three members of the Corey-

Brown branch of the family crowded happily into my house for the occasion. By suppertime the ham was reduced to chips and there was no glut of leftovers in the refrigerator. Paul sat in a corner of the living room where family members could take turns visiting with him. My farmer brothers, Ed and Fred Herbert, stayed late, though many of the guests started for home late in the afternoon. My daughter took a video of the day's events. Paul and Anne stayed over from that Sunday until Tuesday, allowing us at home an extra day's visit. But Paul mostly listened. It seemed to me that everyone else did the talking. Apparently he was used to honing his writing skills by observation.

On Wednesday, December 16, 1992, Mim Joycen, Paul's tenant (she occupied an apartment under the main house) had seen him picking oranges as she left for work. When she returned at five o'clock, she checked in on him and found him standing in the living room with blood on his face. She took him to the bathroom to clean him up. The back of his head had been cut, also the side of his face. He laughed and joked, definitely did not want to see a doctor, and she went downstairs to her apartment. Sometime later, hearing a thump on the floor above her, she went back upstairs. Paul had fallen on his back and was lying on the floor in front of the fireplace, a glove on his hand as if he had been stoking the fire. A call to 911 brought an ambulance within ten minutes, and Paul was driven to the hospital. A stroke was feared.

By the following noon, Paul's right side, then his left side, were paralyzed, and he was comatose. At 1:30 the neurologist pronounced him brain dead, and an hour later he had died. He was cremated immediately, and his ashes joined Ruth's. I so much wish that I had known Paul better and over a longer stretch of time. He had a low-key, self-deprecating sense of humor that I appreciated. I am glad that he was allowed to remain in control of his life till so very near the end. He deserved it. He loved original, irreverent, or outrageous behavior. I have a feeling he probably engaged in quite a bit of it. I shall miss his letters and the sound of his soft voice that

warmed appreciably when he discovered it was me on the telephone. Most of all, I shall miss my last living link to my family's roots.