

# SHOPPING FOR THE APOCALYPSE

My dysfunctional,  
anxiety-ridden search  
for a climate-safe  
Adirondack haven

By Paul Greenberg  
Illustrations by Mike Reddy



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OR THE LAST WEEK I'VE BEEN IN THE ADIRONDACKS, not visiting my new land. My land is just a couple miles up a hill from the cottage I've been renting for the past two summers. I've run up that hill again and again to the roundabout near my land on my morning jog. I circle the sign with the name of the road that now appears on my tax bill but never head down the road to my actual address.

There are many things I could do on my land. I've brought four grape plants up from New York City that I took the time to cut from their mother vine and root during the spring, with the purpose of planting them on my land and taking the first steps toward making my land into the climate-safe homestead I've imagined. I've started a compost bucket at my rental cottage that, when full, I could conceivably carry to my land to start building up the humus. At the very least I could buy some "No Trespassing" signs and post them on the four corners of my acre. But to do that would be to acknowledge actual commitment to a relocation project. The grapevines stay in their pots, the compost in its can, the No Trespassing signs on a rack at an Aubuchon's, unbought, and I stay inside, cowering at the idea of laying claim to the land on which I've already spent time and treasure.

This makes no sense at all because this single acre, in a part of Jay that locals call "the Acres," is exactly the climate haven I've been talking about acquiring for the better part of a decade. I've spent years thinking about the properties I'd want in such a property—a place ideally positioned to escape the floods and fires that have swept over the nation in recent years. I've

consulted with a range of "climate-adaptation specialists" who advise in the growing field of "managed retreat" from vulnerable coastal cities—the kind of city where I've lived my whole life.

And yet I do nothing. Just like the people who think the phrase "climate change" is absurd, I am in a kind of denial. But mine is even worse. I am in a total, all-knowing paralysis.

EVERY HOME FEELS LIKE it's climate safe until it doesn't. My "safe" home is an apartment on the 10th floor of a skyscraper built on a Manhattan ridge-line commonly known as Broadway. I've made numerous reporting sorties from my apartment to disaster areas like post-Katrina New Orleans, the inundating floodplains of southeast Asia and the smoke-choked foothills of the West's great fires. But always I've returned to Broadway and my 10th-floor vantage point and felt safe and sound. Then on October 29, 2012, a hurricane named Sandy blew out the foundation of my smugness. The convergence of the storm with a king tide caused the water

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downhill from me to rise 14 feet, way above the high water marked in 1627 at, well, Water Street. To the south the sea swept over the Rockaway barrier island in Queens, short-circuiting electrical panels in hundreds of homes and setting them on fire. A charter fisherman who lives out that way wrote, "I tell you Paul I looked out the window and I sees the bay hookin' up with the ocean. It was some kind of, I dunno, naval battle at sea!" Farther into Brooklyn, where I usually park my car, the Gowanus Canal, a Superfund site, belched out toxic sludge all over the neighborhood. I had fortunately moved my car to higher ground the day before Sandy hit. But the sludge penetrated deep into the gentrified neighborhoods of Park Slope on one side and Cobble Hill on the other. The next morning I wandered east to the trendy restaurant row down at the South Street Seaport. Every swanky eatery looked like it had been the scene of a bar fight. Tables and chairs were tossed around pell-mell and streams of full beer and liquor bottles poured out onto South Street. The tides had offered them | *Continued on page 62*



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up, free, to the wins of the world.

In the months to come, almost every waterfront planner would have a new idea about what to do next. Ten years later they're still talking. There's even discussion of building a vast dam stretching from Sandy Hook, New Jersey, to Breezy Point, in Queens, a 60-billion-dollar cork in New York's open bottle.

Yeah, right.

All this with COVID thrown on top put an end to my waiting for that big expensive cork. And so, last summer, I headed north looking for land.

The search for my land began in earnest when I met Paul Smith's College forestry professor Brett McLeod and Jay-based Realtor Adam Coolidge at the shaded pavilion that sits on the shore of Lake Eaton in the town of Jay's Ausable Acres. Originally laid out in 1963, the Acres was a subdivision founded by a onetime logger. The development is a work-in-progress. According to the Acres website, out of 900 lots, only around 300 have houses on them. This despite the fact that each parcel in the Acres has a water and electricity hookup. Most of the lots were miraculously within my modest budget. But more relevant to the question of climate change, available lots vary widely, representing an array of topographies, terrain and weather exposure, each with a higher or lower risk of climate disaster. Here was my Goldilocks opportunity—a chance to pare away the bad and find the “just right.”

That I chose the Adirondacks as a climate refuge in the first place was no coincidence. Because when you start looking for a Goldilocks possibility within the greater continental United States you can't do much better. “The biggest thing you notice if you look at the models for this area, what you see is that it will get warmer and wetter,” McLeod told me as we trundled up, past the Acres' dirt roads named after tree species or Indian tribes. How much warmer and wetter? For the winter-aghast who've already relocated and endured a full cold season in the North Country, the numbers are oddly comforting.

“Winter is shrinking,” Paul Smith's

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College natural sciences professor Curt Stager told me. “Currently, winter in the North Country lasts about four and a half months, and, by winter I mean periods when the average temperature is below freezing. Looking at the amount of warming expected for a moderate carbon emissions scenario, winter will last about three and a half months by the end of this century.” In an extreme emissions scenario where no curbing of carbon-dioxide emissions occurs (probably the most likely scenario), winter will still be in the three-month range, though the average of the coldest period will increase from roughly -7 Celsius to -3 Celsius. Still, there is a buffer here that doesn’t exist in places without mountains. Generally, 1,000 feet of elevation correlates to a one and a half degree Celsius decrease in temperature. The higher you go, the colder you get. Rain and snow are more complicated to predict in the Adirondacks, though generally, because of various lake effects and rain shadows, the farther west you go the wetter it becomes.

The other factor that makes the Adirondacks a potential climate haven is the relative infrequency of what adaptation professionals call “presidential disasters”—events so severe that they trigger federal relief. “Almost every US county has had a presidential disaster in the last two decades,” Biden School of Public Policy professor and climate adaptation specialist A. R. Siders told me. “Some have had 15 in the last few years, others have had one or two. There are real differences. When you look about where to move you want to think about places that have had relatively few major disasters.” An interactive FEMA map shows Adirondack counties suffering anywhere from 16 to 22 disasters since 1953. Compare that with, say, Los Angeles County, which logged 74 disasters in the same time period, and things look a bit safer up here.

But there are presidential disasters and then there are personal disasters. Which is why I’d asked Brett McLeod to join me on my land hunt. After a short drive, Coolidge pulled us up to a plot on Algonquin Road that fit in my price

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range. McLeod, a sprightly, energetic man who expends a lot of his sprightliness on his own 30-acre homestead in Vermontville, hopped out of the truck and made a beeline for the road edge. “I don’t like this culvert,” he said, eyeballing the Realtor. “There’s water running through this whole lot.”

Water, it turns out, is perhaps the single greatest factor in determining the climate security of a piece of land. “You want water, but not too much,” McLeod explained, as he mentally crossed the Algonquin plot off his list. “Access to water is hugely important, both ground and surface. The Adirondack Park is blessed with that.” But there’s a big but here. “Places that were nailed during [Tropical Storm] Irene, they were these narrow river valleys where you had steep mountains that didn’t give water anywhere to go. I would avoid ravines.” Both McLeod and Stager agree that when looking for property, a good rule of thumb is to locate the nearest high-water mark from Irene, add a half dozen more feet of elevation and use that as your minimum.

The next parcel was different. For the first time I saw McLeod pleased with what he was seeing. While he was more than pleasant about my land search, I wondered if he saw the Acres as a sad vision of the Adirondacks’ suburbanization to come. As of now the entire six-million-acre park is home to 130,000 people, but McLeod is likely concerned about the climate-worried that are considering the region. Looking at present zoning laws and buildable lots, the area could potentially accommodate twice that number. If pressure to change zoning mounts, perhaps even more.

That pressure very well may mount. Not so much for climate-change reasons, but something related. “It goes back to what your goals are,” McLeod told me at parcel number two as he went looking for the surveyor’s tape that marked the edge of the property. “I think very few people are saying they’re thinking about moving here because of climate change. They think first about their lifestyle. If one of your lifestyle goals is being in a place where you’re still able to do winter

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activities, then this is a logical choice. It's really a lifestyle lens with an overlay of climate change.”

This is already appearing as an intellectual concept worthy of new words among academics. *Solastalgia*, a word that conveys a feeling of abandonment and loneliness, meaning “the homesickness you have when you are still at home”—coined by the environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht—is afflicting a larger and larger portion of the population. A Finnish author meanwhile has recently created the words *lumiahdistus* (snow anxiety) and *talvisuru* (grief for the loss of traditional winter conditions). Finns don't yet use these terms, but they certainly feel them as temperatures rise and the snow retreats. Brett McLeod doesn't use any word for it, but has worked with emigrants from southern Vermont who simply “want to experience winter again like it was in their childhood.”

It was hard to say how winter would bear down on parcel number two, but McLeod seemed impressed by the way the land, dry as a bone, tumbled down into a boulder field and supported mature trees that indicated good soil. He was also attracted to something that another climate-adaptation specialist, Tracy Kijewski-Correa, a civil engineer at the University of Notre Dame, told me always seemed to draw humans into compromising situations. Cliffs, coasts, slopes, views onto all things dangerous make the most attractive real estate, she said. “What makes it beautiful is what makes it hazardous. It's that edge that people like.”

Here the edge was created by a steep slope that McLeod seemed to think was manageable. Kijewski-Correa's words gave me pause, though. “In any kind of environment where you are living at high elevation what immediately is concerning is slope stability,” she told me. “We're going to see more intense rainfall and that means a potential for rock movement that we can't easily predict based on past experience. With softer material, you have less tolerance for steep slopes and thus a greater risk of failure after that rainfall.”

“If it were up to me,” McLeod said, “I'd

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buy this one. This one has real potential.”

I hesitated. I hemmed. I hawed. I took the afternoon to think about it. Finally I called Adam Coolidge to put down an offer.

The land was already gone.

Swept off the market by a family whose *solastalgia* far outweighed their fear of a landslide.

I come by my hesitancy with respect to land honestly, even genetically. Like me, my mother had an obsession with escape—first from overbearing parents and later from a bad marriage. If she could have escaped me, I think she would have. But instead, what she did after her divorce was to escape from house to house until her divorce settlement cash cache dwindled so much that we ceased to own anything at all. At one of our rental cottages she came to date the landlady's son, a much younger man who didn't seem to understand what a mess he'd landed himself in. It perhaps started to come clear to him when my mother hit upon the idea of using her remaining funds to buy a parcel of land in northwestern Connecticut and moving a hunter's cabin onto it. There was no real plan here. No thought as to where this cabin would come from or how it would be moved. But my mother had just enough money left to put in a road. And for a time, every weekend we would decamp to a cottage nearby the land. Every morning my brother and I were handed axes. My mother would fire up a cigarette and a chainsaw and she and her lover would take turns felling birches and maples at the high point where someday there might be a view. Needless to say, my mother and her lover parted ways and the trees overgrew the road. Now someone else owns that land. Last time I checked on Google Maps it was devoid of structures.

Still, it is only human to try to escape what one perceives as fate—whether that fate is driven by climate or parentage. And so the next day I traveled back to the Acres to look at parcel number three—one that Coolidge had showed me at the end of the day. It was a boring piece of land. Pancake flat with no



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water running in or out. Even though the Ausable River was nearby, it was completely out of sight, flowing a good 50 feet lower in the valley below. The lot was in plain view of a road and a second road that branched off the first—something I didn't like much but something Tracy Kijewski-Correa had told me was key. "Road redundancy," multiple points of egress, is vital, she said, when the way gets blocked by a disaster you can't see coming. We'll be blindsided by fate. "We have this awkward moment of trying to tell the future," she said. "That fortune telling is becoming really dangerous. We make models based on past events but things are changing so much that there really is no past model for what's next."

There was a title issue with the land. A couple from Queens had bought it years ago, planning a retreat of their own. In the intervening time their Flushing neighborhood had been soaked in Hurricane Sandy. Then the husband had died. Then the wife. Neither ever made their escape to the Adirondacks. The taxes had been left unpaid and the town of Jay had repossessed the parcel. If I bought the land, I'd have to wait a year to get title insurance to make sure no one rose up to reclaim the lost legacy.

Waiting. That was exactly what I was prepared to do. It's what a lot of people seem to be doing. "I myself am a skeptic that major retreat will happen," Kijewski-Correa told me. "I mean, we can't even enforce the building codes that have been adopted in eight of our most hurricane-prone states. People won't even evacuate. More and more they're choosing to shelter in place."

I waited one more week and finally made a cash offer. It was quickly accepted.

A year has gone by. All title issues have been resolved. The land is mine.

But I'm still waiting. ▲

**Paul Greenberg is the author of *The Climate Diet: 50 Ways to Trim Your Carbon Footprint* and five other books, including *The New York Times* bestseller *Four Fish*. Greenberg is currently the writer-in-residence at The Safina Center and a visiting scholar at the University of Washington's Ocean Nexus Center.**

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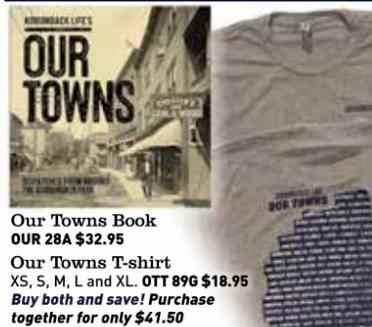
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