

THE LONER

**ALAN COMO SURVIVED TWO DECADES
IN THE WOODS. WAS HE A HERMIT, A COMMON
THIEF, HOMELESS, OR A COMBINATION
OF ALL THREE?** BY KATHRYN JOYCE

WHEN JOHN MADAY and two other investigators from the Warren County Sheriff's Office came upon the campsite, the first thing they saw was a man's feet inside his crude lean-to of pine branches, blankets and tarps. The campsite was built on a flat area just below the summit of Park Mountain, at the southern tip of the Pharaoh Lake Wilderness Area.

It was late morning on January 10, 2007, and the investigators were returning after having made it to the crest of the adjacent hill the night before, when the setting sun had compelled them to turn around. They'd gotten that far in office clothes—shirt-sleeves, ties and street shoes—following a chance tip from the Horicon Town Highway Department that had given them their first lead in months. A town employee had been plowing the roads after a light snowfall when he'd spotted fresh bicycle tracks running for several miles from Brant Lake up to Palisades Road and onto Beaver Pond Road, where the police had found the bicycle hidden under a tarp and tree branches.

But they'd been tracking the suspect much longer than that. For close to two years, the towns of Chester and Horicon and the hamlet of Brant Lake had experienced an unusually high number of petty burglaries at seasonal camps and houses: at least 80 and perhaps as many as

100 break-ins where the thief took food, clothes, alcohol and small items, from batteries to snowshoes, ignoring all electronics or other valuables. In one home, he'd stolen a whole ham; in another, a woman laid out food for that night's dinner before she went for a walk in the woods, only to find it missing when she returned. In some homes, it appeared that the man had rested overnight. In most it seemed he'd come in through the window, sometimes just before the owners returned.

Residents were spooked. Camp and cabin break-ins were common, but often easily explained. Usually it was kids who'd entered during the long winter months when seasonal residents stayed away. In springtime, when camp owners returned, the police would receive a handful of reports from break-ins presumably committed months earlier; many homeowners never bothered to call. Sometimes those who broke in left a note apologizing, explaining that they'd gotten lost or their snowmobile had broken down and they'd had to take something to get by. But these burglaries were more systematic—reoccurring regularly across seasons for nearly two years. And if the burglar was breaking into homes when he thought people were away, residents feared that meant there was someone out in the woods watching them.

ILLUSTRATION BY PAT KINSELLA



Many of the items found in Alan Como's makeshift shelter were stolen from seasonal camps.



The Sheriff's Office and State Police were frustrated and embarrassed that they hadn't found the burglar. They'd gotten close in the past, locating another campsite nearby, and treading lightly as they observed the stolen items in the camp so that the suspect wouldn't realize it'd been found. But after they'd gone there once, the man seemed to abandon the site. The previous fall they'd gone out with police dogs but hadn't found anything. People saw an unfamiliar man biking in the area, at a time of year when cyclists stick out, and believed it must be the intruder, but every time his location was called in he'd disappear.

From the stashed bike on the side of the road, the investigators followed footprints into the woods surrounding a cluster of housing developments at the base of a private access trail up Park Mountain. The tracks led to a small cook site, with a rock-lined fire pit and a frying pan, and then up, miles into the backcountry behind Beaver Pond. As nightfall approached, the investigators realized that if they came upon the suspect in the dark, he'd take off into the woods and disappear again. The tracks up into the mountain were more like goat paths than trails, the forest floor heavy with past seasons' leaves and thick with brush.

"If he runs," Major Jim LaFarr remembered them deciding, "we won't find him again."

The next morning, when Maday and two colleagues returned, they crested the hill they'd stopped at the previous day. Straight ahead of them was the lean-to, with a trail of smoke issuing from a foil-lined chimney within, and blankets wedged into the cracks between the branches that formed its walls. They walked over quietly, but when they got within 20 feet of the tarp that formed the hut's door, the man sat up abruptly. He was a big fellow, with hardly an ounce of fat on him, wearing layers of heavy clothes—thick pants with gaiters, a black, zippered fleece. They looked at each other for a minute, Maday recalled, before the police called

out to him. "We hollered, 'Stop, police,' and he was gone."

Just below the lean-to was the ledge of a large boulder and below that a neck-breaking descent. The man slid down the ledge, then took off down the mountainside with several big leaps, gliding on the padding of his many layers of clothes.

"I've never seen anyone move like that," said Maday. With each leap the man slid 10 feet, so that within seconds he was hundreds of feet away.

The chase went on for two hours. The man reached an old logging road, where the sun had partially baked the snow off the ground, obscuring his footprints. He dipped in and out of the woods, sometimes doubling back. He'd run far ahead, then wait, catching his breath, until the investigators drew close enough that he'd have to start again. The police—now including more sheriff's officers and members of the state police, fanned out to form a perimeter, wary that on the other side of the mountain lay a 100-year-old road, long since abandoned, that stretched over Pharaoh Mountain, into the large expanse of wilderness around Schroon Lake. But instead, the man emerged on the property of a camp on Beaver Pond Road, where two police were waiting on either side of the roadway, and finally he stopped.

When news of the chase hit the papers, residents learned that a 56-year-old "Adirondack Bushman" named Alan Como had been captured after living for some 20 years in the woods. In his mugshot, Como looked the part of a Northwoods hermit—a "mountain man," some called him—with long, stringy black hair on the sides of his head; ruddy, wind-burned cheeks; and a tousled beard gone mostly to gray, twisting in multiple directions at once. His eyes were solemn and seemed either emotionless or startled, fixed in middle distance. For someone his age, police and reporters agreed, he was in remarkable shape.

According to an incident report, Como had to be physically taken into custody when he was arrested and charged

with trespassing and resisting arrest. Afraid that Como could easily disappear if he was processed too quickly, he was held in lieu of a \$40,000 bond.

Como didn't talk much, except to say that he was from Massachusetts, that he'd been living in the woods for decades, and that he wouldn't say more without a lawyer present. But he tentatively opened up to one officer, Terry Comeau, then in his first year with the sheriff's department. Comeau had been the one to drive Como back to the station, and what struck him most was the dissonance in the mountain man's affect when he tried to talk about different things. If Comeau asked about the break-ins, Como responded with a blank stare. When he asked about Como's family, offering to help him get back home, the man

ALTHOUGH COMO CAME CLOSE TO FINISHING HIS COLLEGE DEGREE, SOMETHING IN HIS LIFE STARTED TO GO WRONG. HE BEGAN TAKING JOBS WHERE HE DIDN'T HAVE TO INTERACT WITH MANY PEOPLE, AND ONCE TOLD HIS BROTHER THAT HE WAS LIVING OFF OF WHAT FOOD SCRAPS HE COULD FIND IN GARBAGE CANS.

responded with seeming paranoia. But if he asked about his life in the woods, Como warmed up and began to talk.

"I'm not a clinical psychologist," said Comeau, "but he was very nervous about his family—he didn't want them to know where he was. I remember him saying, 'I don't want them to put me away.'" Como struck Comeau as smart and well-read, but a little off—troubled by a sense that unnamed people were stalking him. In a subsequent incident report, a fellow officer reported how Como spoke cryptically of what seemed like delusional fears: how he'd gone to live in the woods because when he was 19 someone he'd known had tried to hurt him by putting "things

about him on TV and on the radio."

"I could tell in a few minutes that there was something not quite there. There were some other issues besides him not wanting to admit he was breaking into cabins. Something he had in his mind that he didn't want to go back to," said Comeau. "It could have been the cops after him or his family after him. I think it was a combination of all that. I don't think he thought that anybody was on his side. He was alone and he'd been alone for so long."

Trying to calm him down, Comeau asked the man about how he'd gotten by: how he'd stayed warm; how he'd repaired the flooring in his lean-to, or had relocated it when the spring run-off threatened to flood his original site; how he'd gone unnoticed by the hunters whose tree-stands were, in some places, just a quarter-mile from his camp. He asked how Como had used some of the items he'd stolen, like a cake mix that had been reported missing from one burgled home, and Como noticeably lightened as he explained the mechanics of baking in the woods.

"He seemed to come back to reality speaking about that stuff," said Comeau. "I don't think it was an act. He didn't want to talk about how he got the cake mix, but he wanted to talk about how he survived."

When the police ran a background search, they turned up few records. The last identification on record for Como was a driver's license from the mid-'80s. It appeared that Como had been involved in a similar spate of burglaries in Chazy Lake, around 100 miles to the north, a couple of years before. And it emerged that he'd once been incarcerated for five months in New Hampshire for a litany of more than 80 camp burglaries there. Although Como refused reporters' interview requests, and told his court-appointed lawyer to do the same, Don Lehman, a journalist for the *Glens Falls Post-Star*, found that Como had previously lived on a mountaintop in northwest New Hampshire, in a hut

made of wood and dirt, where he'd been so removed from the world that he'd missed one of the most transformative events of his lifetime. As Enfield, New Hampshire, Police Sergeant Ken May told Lehman, when Como was arrested there in 2002 and taken into the station, he'd happened to see a *Time* magazine issue discussing the attacks of 9/11. When Como asked the officers to explain the images on the cover, May remembered, it looked like he was about to cry.

AFTER THE ARREST, the police located a smattering of other, smaller sites nearby: cook areas and supply drops, a water filtration system down at the pond, more-infor-

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mal campsites scattered around, presumably for times when Como didn't make it home to the summit. The police returned several times to the main camp, dragging back toboggans piled with items retrieved from Como's stash. There were clothes—some, like the pants Como was wearing the day he was arrested, labeled with their owners' names—flashlights, batteries, camping knives, snowshoes, maps and books. Many of the books centered on wilderness themes: the short stories of Jack London; William Hagan's *Longhouse Diplomacy and Frontier Warfare*; John Hunt's *Our Everest Adventure*; and Sally Carrighar's *Wild Heritage*; as well as several copies of a periodical, *North Country Life*, circa the early 1960s; an article on the geological history of the Adirondacks; and a weathered-looking guidebook entitled *Exploring the Adirondack Mountains 100 Years Ago*.

The plan was for victims to identify the retrieved items so that Como could be charged with criminal possession (proving burglary after the fact would be nearly impossible, they said). But ultimately they settled on another tactic. To avoid the time and hassle of bringing countless victims of petty theft before a grand jury, and the risk that it was hard to convict someone based on the possession of stolen property alone, Como was offered a plea deal for the unusual charge of felony criminal mischief for cutting down trees on state land.

The charge heightened a sense of debate about what to call Como: a survivalist or a thief? A mountain man or a scavenger? On some online forums discussing the case, observers who hailed Como as a "legendary hermit" chafed at the implications of the official charge, comparing the tree-cutting violation to how Robin Hood's fellow travelers were pursued for "hunting the King's Deer": a bad precedent for the freedom of those who "choose to live outside the boundaries of mainstream society." Other online discussions betrayed more ambivalence: "A new 'hermit'?" was the title of one.

The mythology of Adirondack hermits predates the existence of the Adi-

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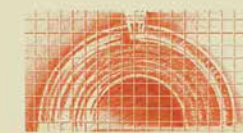
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ronducks as a park itself. In the 1820s, there was Moses Follensby, a British veteran rumored to have fled to the woods with a treasure of gold and silver after the infidelity of his wife. A couple of decades later there was Atwell Martin, thought to have similarly chosen a life in the wilderness to escape "wimmin," and who later became a famous local guide with an infamously hearty appetite. These hermits were rewarded in posterity: three bodies of water were named after Follensby, and Atwell was memorialized in the southwestern Adirondack hamlet that bears his name. Louis Seymour, or "French Louie," a trapper and one-time circus member, followed in the mid-1800s, immortalized in lore as a lovable "Adirondack outlaw." And in the 1940s, there was Noah John Rondeau, the self-declared "Mayor of Cold River City (Population: 1)."

Rondeau lived in the High Peaks Wilderness for nearly 36 years, even as he stretched the meaning of the word hermit beyond common understanding. It's Rondeau's cabin that makes up the cornerstone of the hermitage exhibit at the Adirondack Museum, in Blue Mountain Lake, and he was known for aphorisms like "Man is forever a stranger and alone." But in apparent opposition to that image, he intentionally diverted the Northville-Placid trail—originally built to bypass his camp—so that he could meet travelers and entertain them with outlandish stories, songs on his violin and even, apparently, haircuts. He'd later go on to play Santa Claus for thousands of Christmas guests at Wilmington's Santa's Workshop, and consented to be flown to appear at sporting expositions as the iconic Adirondack hermit.

That was hardly the traditional image of a hermit, but "Noah John" has come to be the standard for the region. And when Como was arrested, some were angered by the comparison. "No way can you ever compare this man to Noah John or French Louie," wrote one commenter on an Adirondack forum. "They were real mountain men who lived off the land, not other people."

While some of the burglary victims in the Brant Lake area were sympathetic, noting that they'd have been happy to give Como food if he'd asked, or telling authorities that they didn't mind whatever he'd taken in order to survive, others felt the mythology attached to the word "hermit" cast a false light on Como's crimes.

Karen Pratt, a resident of Beaver Pond, expressed a stronger sense of violation; when Como allegedly broke into Pratt's home in the summer of 2005, among other things he took were an heirloom pair of snowshoes she'd inherited from her grandparents. Beyond the loss of an item with significant emotional value, Pratt said, was the loss of privacy she felt when she'd come home to realize someone had broken in through her bedroom window—a shock that led her to install an alarm system in what had always felt like a uniquely safe area.

"I remember at the time that it was being romanticized—that this person was living off the land, like in the Adirondack Museum or like Thoreau," said Pratt. "He wasn't a harmless camper. He was a thief. He violated my privacy and I won't be the same for it."

Many of the police involved in the search thought the same. "I don't want to give this guy a positive label," said Major LaFarr. "The mountain men you traditionally think of as hermits, they find ways to hunt, fish, make moonshine, survive off the land. We found no evidence of anything that would indicate this guy was anything other than a scavenger."

BY ANOTHER LIGHT, what Como could be called is, simply, homeless. "I think it's one and the same," said Terry Comeau, the investigator who'd spoken with Como. "He's a hermit here, or homeless in New York City or Albany."

Homelessness in the Adirondacks seems anathema to both the picturesque environment and the harshness of the winters. But Rich Loeber, president of the Ecumenical Council of Saranac Lake, an interfaith social justice organization, said that it's likely that for every 5,000 people in the park, at

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least 50 of them are homeless—national statistics indicate that between one and 1.5 percent of the population is homeless at any given time, in both rural and urban areas.

"We have resistance to saying there are people who are homeless in the Adirondacks. Most people think that means people living under overpasses or in boxes, but that's not what homelessness looks like in the North Country," said Loeber. Often it looks like people drifting from one couch-surfing scenario to another in the winter, and living in cars or tents on state land in warmer months.

Although it remains largely invisible, Loeber said that it's enough of an issue that the closest current facility for homeless people, in Malone, operates with a constant waiting list, as do Saranac Lake's two existing respite apartments, administered by Lakeside House, a service organization that also works with adults dealing with mental illness or substance abuse. (Together, the two groups are in the process of finalizing a homeless transition home, Samaritan House, to be located in downtown Saranac Lake.)

"It's there but you don't see it, and because you don't see it, it's easy to say it's not there," said Loeber.

IN JAIL, COMO WAS considered a "model prisoner": quiet, never causing disturbances, just keeping to himself and doing his time. But LaFarr remembered hearing from the guards that Como paced in his cell "like a dog in a cage," evidently distressed at being locked up. When he climbed the stairs, Como took them two or three at a time, bounding up them as though he were trying to stay in climbing shape. At one point after he'd been transferred to a state prison, recalled John Maday, Como got himself placed on an outside work crew, until a local officer from Chestertown told his bosses, "Do you realize this is the guy that lived in the woods all those years?"

"It would have been only a matter of time before he escaped," Maday said.

To some of the law enforcement officers who dealt with him, Como



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seemed an enigma—what Warren County Sheriff Bud York called a “Ted Kaczynski kind of guy: a very intelligent guy who lived like a recluse.” He seemed obviously bright, but unstable, LaFarr agreed, adding, “You know how there’s a fine line between really smart people and crazy people? Something might have caused him to go a little too far and just get away.”

To his family, Como was something else. “I try to look at this in black and white and I come up with a gray area,” said his younger brother, Bill Como, a 62-year-old resident of West Ossipee, New Hampshire.

While Bill said that no one in the family had ever been able to identify a “real fine point” on what the crossroads had been in Alan’s life, it was evident that there had been one.

Growing up as one of eight children in the 1950s and ’60s, Bill said, Alan was the next-youngest child after him, and the two lived together with their mother after many of their older siblings had left the home. Theirs was a large, Catholic family on the outskirts of Boston, and things at home were often troubled. Both of their parents had drinking problems, and after they divorced, their mother worked long hours to support the children remaining at home. Alan often stepped in to make sure Bill ate dinner and took a bath. He was generous elsewhere in his life as well—a good student, a football player, and a popular boy who naturally made friends. Bill remembered Alan as the champion of underdogs, sticking up for kids bullied on the playground, and once, during high school, coming home with a torn sweater after he’d intervened to help a girl they knew leave an abusive relationship.

After graduating from high school, Alan went to Boston College to study psychology, but remained in his mother’s house so that he could make sure that Bill, the last child still living at home, was OK. Their mother had remarried by then, and the new stepfather was violent. Once, Bill recalled, Alan stepped in to stop him from hitting their mother and the incident

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escalated to the point that the police were called. Finally, when Bill turned 16, he told his mother that he couldn’t continue living under the same roof as the stepfather. After Bill moved into his own apartment, Alan finally moved out as well.

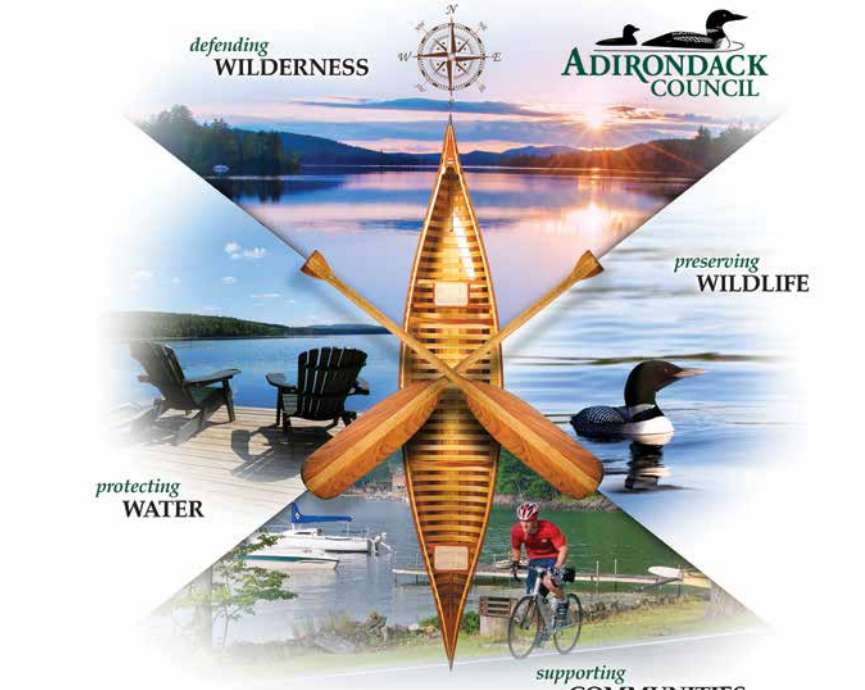
“Alan was always there, in any situation I came up with,” said Bill. “He basically put his life on hold for me.”

But although Alan came close to finishing his college degree—working on a thesis about self-examination, and holding down several jobs to pay his way through school—something in his life started to go wrong. He began taking jobs where he didn’t have to interact with many people, and once told Bill that he was living off of what food scraps he could find in garbage cans. He enlisted in the Navy but was dishonorably discharged—due, Bill believes, to an unspecified psychiatric disorder that began to manifest in his 20s—and when he attempted to enlist in the Army, that branch shortly found out about his Navy record and discharged him as well.

He remained a generous man even as his own life fell into disarray. At one point, Bill said, he gave all the money he had—some \$3,000—to a woman in trouble. And when one of the towns they lived in didn’t have the resources to start a little league team, Alan volunteered to manage the team and helped coach them to win that year’s pennant. Ultimately, Bill said, Alan went to live with a sister, who monitored him and tried to get him to take the psychiatric medication he’d by then been prescribed.

“But then one day he just up and didn’t anymore, and was gone,” said Bill. “I think he kind of gave up on life, on people. Because he had given and given and given, and there comes a point where you’ve given so much and can’t give anymore.”

It would be some 25 years before they would know what had happened to Alan when, in 2009, a member of the family happened upon an article written about Como’s arrest and sentencing, and learned that he was in prison in New York. Commenters claiming to



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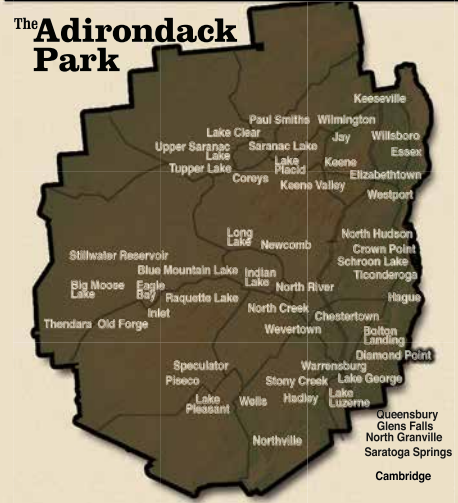
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be family members found their way to an article posted about Como on the blog Adirondack Base Camp, and wrote in to share their recollections. There was a niece who had always been told of an uncle who had “disappeared off the face of the earth,” and a cousin who said his family told him that Como “was running from something bad.” The family expressed shock that Alan’s apparent mental illness wasn’t taken into account by the justice or corrections systems, and said that to their understanding he hadn’t received adequate psychiatric care in prison.

After learning where Como was, the family wrote to him repeatedly via the state correctional facility, but, an article at the time reported, the Department of Corrections noted that they had to respect inmates’ wishes to refuse visitors.

In the 30 or so years since Alan departed from his family’s life, said Bill Como, his brothers and sisters have mostly resigned themselves to the fact that Alan obviously “wants to be left alone and has done everything in his power to make sure it stays that way.”

But still Bill found himself baffled. “I would never foresee in a million years that this kid could walk off the planet and dissolve into the Adirondacks and become part of life in the woods.”

IN EARLY SEPTEMBER 2016, nearly a decade after they were first looking for Como, Jim LaFarr and John Maday climbed back up Park Mountain to find the site where Como had stayed. It was a bright, sunny Tuesday and the water in Beaver Pond was glass-still, reflecting a perfect image of the mountain above it and the trees just starting to turn.

After an hour-and-a-half bushwhack up the mountainside and around the summit, thick with ferns and dead trees, Maday located Como’s camp. The lean-to had collapsed upon itself: a pile of branches, plastic and fabric stacked in uneven layers; a shiny scrap from the aluminum foil that once served as Como’s chimney; the branches of his backwoods toilet still

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configured in a generally neat stack; the rope fragments that once held his food stores still hanging from a tree. Tucked in the crevices of a boulder below the campsite were dozens of plastic bags of garbage—likely once tied up for eventual removal, but long since ripped open and scattered by animals and nine years of winter weather. Some of the visible contents were evocative—old cassette players with ripped, unmarked tapes; an open, battered copy of *Moby Dick*—but most was just trash: cooking oil containers, rusted cans, beer bottles with the labels worn off.

“Boy does it look different,” said LaFarr. “You could walk right by that.” At the time when they’d found him, and had returned for the several trips to retrieve the stolen property, all the ground on Como’s campsite had been trampled. Now, with few or no humans likely to have walked this ground for years, the place was reverting to nature: mushrooms growing on the sides of the lean-to’s flattened walls and saplings sprouting up on what had been the worn paths of Como’s homestead. Blueberries grew in short shrubs on the exposed face of the outcropping, looking down over Beaver Pond, but when I ventured that Como must have once eaten from the plants, Maday scoffed. “Only if they were in someone’s refrigerator.”

Como was released on parole in September of 2009. At the Warren County Sheriff’s Office, investigators were doubtful that he’d manage to stay within the bounds of his parole.

“I can’t see him living anything like a traditional life,” said Jim LaFarr.

But a year later, in 2010, he completed his parole. Where he is now is anyone’s guess. Bill Como said no one in the family has heard from him since.

“He’ll be out in the woods,” said Warren County Sheriff Bud York. “‘Come and find me,’ is what he’d say.” ▲

Kathryn Joyce is an award-winning New York City-based writer whose work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic* and *Pacific Standard*. She grew up in Saranac Lake.

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