



BUCOLIC MEMORIES of a SNOWY CHILDHOOD

Lately, I'm preoccupied with the thought of snow. It has been near sixty degrees the past few days here in Kansas, and what little snow we accumulated in a fleeting New Year's storm melted weeks ago. It could be any season, save for the bare-limbed trees. The green winter wheat is sprouting up in the fields like a manicured lawn. The native grasses are brown, but then they were brown in August. I recognize that much of the rest of the country would be thrilled to have my sunny, warm weather problems. But I read articles about the blizzards roaring through the upper Midwest and Plains and I'm jealous.

When I was growing up in South Dakota, February was always snowed-over and icy. The morning radio would announce the wind chill, counseling parents

how long to allow their children out of doors before they need fear frostbite. In the backseat of my parents' car, I would tune in attentively to the local news report, hoping each day it would finally be too cold for school to open. It never was. We would arrive and I would join my friends running over the salted pavement, past frozen drifts of snow, to reach the school doors. Inside the classroom, pink-cheeked, we laughed as sensation tickled back into our fingers.

Winter isolated our house. On six heavily pine-filled acres, tucked up against the National Forest, my family kept a safe distance from the rest of the world. The steep, winding dirt road from the highway iced over with the first blizzard in late October and some years remained treacherous into May. We didn't invite over friends much, to save their cars the trouble. In my memory, the UPS truck attempted Christmas deliveries to our house twice, and both times it got stuck, frantically spinning its wheels against the ice at the base of our driveway. As the UPS driver thanked my father for helping him free his truck, he counseled us to pick up our packages in town during the Winter months.

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March often brought the harshest blizzards, which could drop multiple feet of snow overnight. Waking, we would find our driveway completely impassable. I loved those times best. Especially when the snow fell for days, snapping power lines, dampening the sounds of the outside world. All electronic noises ceased, save for the occasional bleats and droning announcements of the battery-powered weather radio. Walled off, we dipped into the stores of canned food, and cooked soups over a camp stove. My parents carried matches and lighters from room to room, lighting candles and oil lamps. The flickering light cast supernatural shadows through the house. I would sit reading by the window, huddled in sweaters and blankets, squinting under the gray, snow-filtered daylight.

I can't remember this very well, but my Mom has told me that for the first five years of my life, we heated our house almost entirely with wood. I do

remember watching, perched atop a stump, as my parents felled trees. Each time I wandered too close, they both pushed me away, expressing in their most serious tones how dangerous it was to stand in the path of the falling tree. But I was fascinated by their work, by their industry and their deliberate sawing. I watched them portion the trees into small sections and then set up each to be chopped into the recognizable stalks of firewood. By the end of the summer, the stack of wood was impossibly large.

"So much work," my mother tells me now, remembering the years of heating with wood. "It never ended. The chopping, the stacking, in the summer. And, in the winter, constantly feeding the wood stoves." All the same, she seems pleased to recall those years. "It felt good," she says, "all the work."

But, when I was about five, we retired one of the two large wood stoves and from then on, save for power outages, we heated our house using electricity. Less romantic, perhaps, but more effective. And considerably less work. But on

those blizzard days, the family gathered near the one remaining wood stove in the basement as it returned to its work. While snow drifted outside, mom and dad would haul in firewood. Dad would open the door of the stove, prodding the fire, and when he looked back at us, he was warm-cheeked, his beard dark with cinders. The wood stove, roaring to life, pumped out impressive amounts of heat. The snowflakes from our outer layers, hair, and eyelashes melted into puddles on the floor, forgotten until later, when some stocking-foot unknowingly traipsed through.

One winter night when I was older, after my sister Jenni had given birth to

her first child, we all tucked in around the wood stove. We had made it through a couple of winters without much use for the old stove, but now the power had been out all day and, come nightfall, we needed the warmth. My Mom constructed makeshift beds for each of us, heaps of blankets in an assortment of chairs and on the floor. Jenni and the baby tucked in together on the couch. Dad poked at the fire, expressing concern over the state of the stove and its years of neglect.

I waited for sleep, listening to my parents' quiet voices. Was it safe for us to sleep with the fire going, my father wondered. My Mother pointed out that half the family was already asleep and the fire didn't seem to be smoking badly. Meanwhile, an oil lamp on the shelf lit shadows across the ceiling. The baby breathed heavily in and out. The wind whistled outside, rustling the trees, shaking loose the snow which fell plop plop plop to the ground. I curled up in my armchair, warm under the blankets. I was aware, even then, how rare this night was. How the feeling of having all my family, safe and close around the fire, was something precious which I would wish to recapture in the future and find impossible. A one-time magic. In the morning, we woke to find our nostrils were ringed with black soot. My parents were horrified, and especially disturbed by the sight of the black-nosed baby, but I was still grateful to have had that night, cozied up together, insulated by the snow.

That is the feeling I associate with snow: a feeling of insulation, of safety. It's counterintuitive, I suppose, given how easily cold can turn to death. My parents, in philosophical moments, frightened me with their ideas of "walking out into the blizzard;" their chosen location to meet the end, when compared to the slow wasting-away of old age, would be propped up under a Black Hills Spruce, bottle of whiskey in hand, as the snow drifted in. In retrospect, they could have kept that information from me, spared my small child's psyche that particular contemplation. But the snow made us all thoughtful and we talked more honestly, as a family, watching it fall.



It's the thoughtfulness of snow, the quiet, that I miss most. Beneath the smooth white surface, all that riot of wildflowers and flying insects and chirping birds that would come with Spring lay in anticipation. But, for now, it was still. The mind could rest. Thoughts could move in smooth, logical, lines; each could be examined carefully and individually before each was placed aside. And when the thoughts piled up, I carried them outside.

Certain freedoms were allowed to a child raised in the forest. When I was still far too young for my parents to allow me alone into the town, I was always free to roam into the woods. I never learned to ride a bike, but by Elementary school, I could put on my cross-country skis and glide into the trees alone. It was common for me to disappear for hours at a time. As far as I know, my parents didn't worry. Where could I go? Even without skis, I enjoyed the slow progress of hiking in the snow. I dispersed the weight of heavy thoughts as I trudged knee-deep past the treehouse, past Bonnie and Clyde's car, (or so my sister and I called it, left to rust, far from the road, with birds roosting in the backseat and multiple bullet holes testifying to its criminal past.)Up at the Bluff, I looked down over a large snow-filled valley and out over hills stretching for miles. There, the whole world emptied.

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It was a place to feel small. It was our family's spot, the place from which I could always orient myself in the forest. Home behind the left shoulder. Even after logging scrambled my landmarks and rearranged the deer paths I'd be using for years, I could sense my way to the Bluff. In the summer, we packed picnics and flung sandwich crusts over the edge into the valley. In the winter, I sat and looked out into the emptiness, and felt comforted. Even now, when the place holds some grief—memories of my parents selling their house, moving away, the loss of my father—I return to the Bluff in my mind as a touchstone. It was the place where I formed myself.

I took one last winter hike. It was the early Spring, my senior year of High School. Everything was changing. I was preparing for college, preparing to move away. I set out into the woods without purpose, killing time before a family dinner celebrating something I no longer remember. It was colder than I'd expected and I wasn't moving fast enough to keep out the chill. The snow was deep and I stumbled through it awkwardly. Within a mile, I turned back.

Retracing my path, I came back within sight of the house. The windows glowed against the gray afternoon. Despite the numbness of my extremities, I stopped to look at it. I sat down on a stump. My sister's car was in the driveway. Everyone was inside. And, without being told, I knew that we were at the end of something important. The end of childhood. I didn't know yet that my parents would sell the house, but I did know that somehow adulthood would conspire to take my home away from me. That I would be forced to make new magic, a new family. And I didn't feel up to the task. Knowing the warmth that was

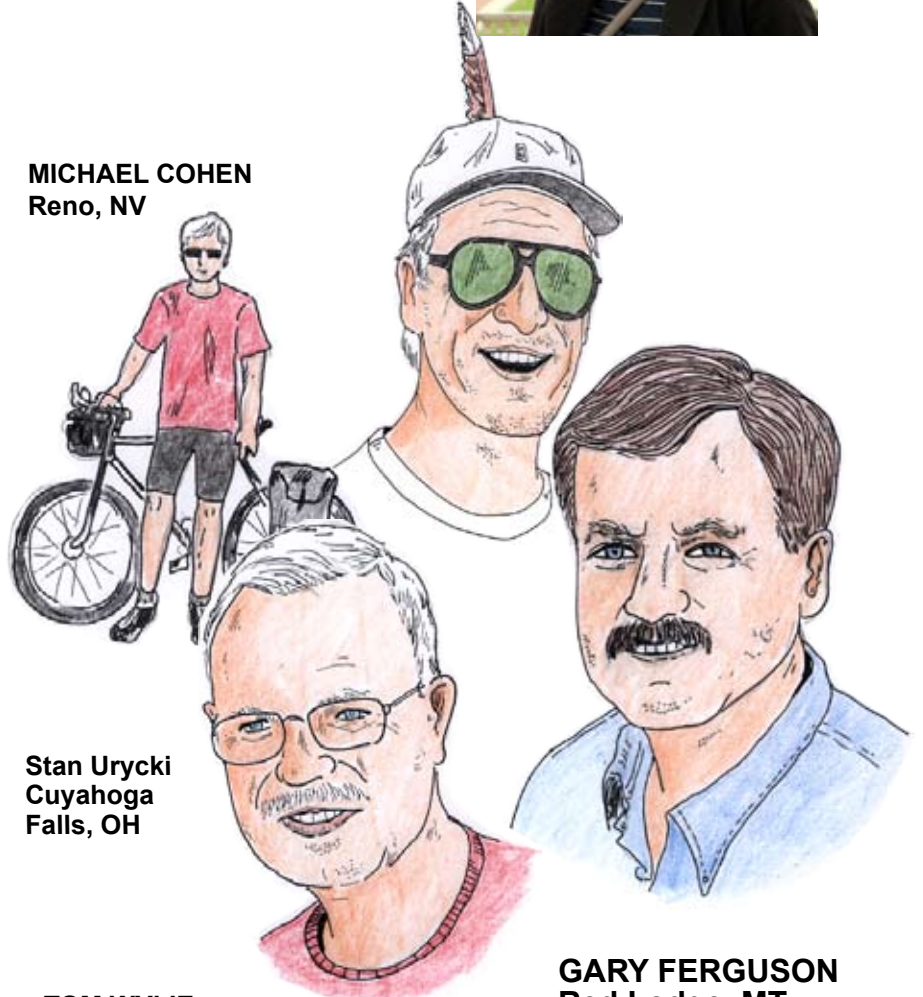
waiting for me inside that house, pots simmering on the oven, Dad's favorite symphony playing in the background, everyone talking and laughing over each other, I felt, for the first time, apart. Distant.

I worried. Not just that I might not ever find that secure feeling again, but that I might forget it. Running up to the house, I was relieved to open the door and discover my life still inside. My family. The music playing and dinner cooking and some political argument brewing between my father and sister. The place, and the people I knew so intimately. I was at home. And it is that feeling, warm and sentimental and a bit mournful, that returns to me each year with the desire for snow.

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