

12/December/ Light in the Darkness

Gail Balden

Word Count: 680

As winter approaches, for those of us with woodstoves and fireplaces, one of the best things to have is a full woodshed. It represents the fruit of our labors. We've earned it by chopping, splitting, gathering and stacking with our own hands--all for the satisfaction of gathering round the fire's glow on a cold winter's night. Our new woodstove has the words "Love Life, Live Large" stamped on the inside of the top loading door, a nice reminder each time we add another log. We wouldn't think of passing a winter's evening without a warm fire as our companion. In days gone by there were a couple furry lumps otherwise known as fat cats stretched out by the fire and a big old dog warming his back on the hearth. Nothing is so cheery on a long winter's night than the crackling of a good hot fire and leap of flame up the stovepipe.

I've finished the autumn chores for the garden, greenhouse, and garden shed. I've even banished the packrat from the attic. The tulip and daffodil bulbs are in their earthly nests, a sure sign of hope if there ever was one. Soon winter storms may rage. But now's the time to get out old favorite books or dive into the adventure of new ones. Now's the time for a roast in the oven along with sturdy winter vegetables like squash and parsnips. A few red maple leaves still cling to the tree at the front steps, but it's momentary. I've cut a few fir branches and sprig of holly to bring inside and dug out the old familiar Christmas ornaments, each a treasure. We're coming up on winter solstice on December 21, a time to celebrate the sun. Officially the first day of winter, the solstice marks the shortest day and longest night of the year. Following the solstice, days begin to grow longer and nights shorter, which for a lot of people yearning for radiance is their salvation.

I like to cast out the darkness with plenty of lights—candlelight, electric candles in the windows, Christmas lights outlining the roof of the house, icicle lights hanging from the peak of the greenhouse, chili pepper lights strung from the tops of windows. All create a glow, a feeling of coziness. A drive in the evening reveals storefronts and houses draped in greens and light, barns and boats edged in shades of crayon box colors, and here and there a lighted outline of a peace sign or Santa on the rooftop. After the riotous color of summer and the brilliance of autumn, the Red Twig Dogwood gives forth a barren beauty of its own. With the valleys opened up by leafless trees, it's easier to see the land we live on.

On a hike up Saddle Mountain in afternoon light, I can see the land contours, the folds and hues of the valleys. With the sun far south and the knowledge that dusk comes before any of us are finished with the day, I head down the trail to make it back before dark. Though the day is warm, as the sun lowers in the sky, there's that winter is coming feel to the air. And then just before sunset, a gift. The mountain is drenched in a pure breathless pink light. Glowing through the stark alders and against their white bark, it looks as if the entire forest is bathed in apricot glory. The drive home past houses snuggled down for the night is under a streaky sky of faded blue and pink, the last light of day. The dark mountain ridges are touched with just a hint of lilac, and the fir trees look majestic silhouetted against the backdrop of color. Above hangs a silver sliver of a moon, the first stars of evening and the jewel of the night, Venus.

Home again to the peace of the evening fire, the sweetness of music or silence, I relish the thought that there is beauty in every season, and that the seasons roll around, as they should.