**Showcasing the DNR: A holiday toast to a winter’s night**

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*“Wind at your window, screams while you sleep. You live near your fire as the winter blows by,” –* Steve Forbert

As the metal storm door clicked shut behind me, I almost immediately sensed the mildness of the air meeting my face – warm for a winter’s evening. The wind was dead or at least fast asleep.

Soft glowing light shone through the windows of the living room, diffused by curtains that hung like translucent gossamer, out into the snow where it flowed and pooled around the trunks of the maple trees.

The silence was profound and powerful.

I soaked it up like a deep breath of fresh air.

The only creatures stirring were a couple of flying squirrels that leapt from one of the bird feeders into the maple’s waiting branches. There they ran in a quick swirl, one after the other, up and around the trunk of the tree.

They too were silent, except for the scuffing, scratchy sound of their feet on the limbs. They seemed to disappear like chimney smoke, swirling higher and higher into the tree and then – gone.

Peaceful nights like this make me want to lie in the snow in a sleeping bag. I could look up at the stars, let the snow envelop me and sleep the deepest wintry sleep.

I drove past the cemetery a couple of nights back. From the road, I could look past the wrought iron fence to see bare oaks and maples standing tall. I wondered who or what the fence was supposed to be keeping in or out.

The entry gates were swung wide open in the darkness, and the roads were plowed clean. Anyone or anything that wanted to walk in or out would have no problem passing this cold iron “barrier.”

On a couple of the snow-covered gravestones blue, red, yellow and green Christmas lights were lit. From the icy road I was traveling, this burial ground for thousands of townsfolk looked serene.

In the cool blue of the night, I wondered what this street, this neighborhood, this night “looked like” to those inside. Did they have any knowledge of the goings-on anymore of us remaining here, struggling through our daily lives?

Asleep under the insulating blankets of soft, white snow, I got the feeling they were comfortable, tucked in and cared for – under the outstretched arms of the hardwood trees and stone statuettes.

When I was a kid riding in our car, if we passed a cemetery, my dad would ask us kids, “Do you know how many people are dead in there?”

After one of us asked, “How many?” he’d say, “All of ‘em.”

Now he’s one of those folks gone to sleep forever and I’m asking his same question to our girls when we drive by in the car.

Like my dad, I will continue to ask no matter how many times I’ve asked before – despite the eyerolls, sighs or grumbles.

Maybe someday, the girls will ask their kids the same thing.

Only a few hours after the sweet moments of silent night I experienced in the yard, the snow had begun to fall. It was a wet snow, thrown against the trees by strengthening winds that spattered it up and down the tree trunks and clung to the hanging branches of the spruces and the balsam firs.

The yard now looked like a snow globe that somebody shook hard, a holiday card image missing only the red wreath ribbon. This was the type of snow that makes pretty pictures.

Everything looked flocked, including an old bluebird house hanging off the trunk of an apple tree. A couple of bat boxes fastened higher on a maple were almost unrecognizable, packed thick with heavy, sticky snow.

The woodshed and the chicken coop were also covered in snow, the outlines of the door accentuated by the accumulating snowfall.

Deer made their way into the yard through the deep snow. The tracks of a doe and a fawn meandered under the apple trees. I can see where the fawn jumped, perhaps uncomfortable in the deep drifts, trying to keep up with its mother.

There’s a wreath hanging on the kitchen’s glass back door. It’s fashioned from dried vines, pinecones and holly berries. I am waiting with my camera for one of those deer to line up with the inside circle of that wreath.

Now that would be a pretty holiday card photo.

Nothing yet.

I remember when I was a kid, there were gimmicks around to make Christmas trees look more lifelike or sparkly. Trees would be sprayed with white flocking that came in a can, like spray paint, to provide a snow-covered look.

At one point, we had acquired a used artificial tree made from shiny strips of tin foil tied onto braided pieces of wire. The twisted wire ends of these branches were stuck into holes on a wooden pole.

A spinning wheel, with colored plastic lenses and powered by an electric motor, cast four colors of light onto the tree, which then reflected into the room in a shimmery fashion.

All through the night the snow continued to fall, and the winds roared. I felt particularly cozy the higher the snow piled up. I was warm, sitting in the house watching the scene from the window.

A couple of days after the storm, the sun broke through the steely gray skies – a sight that hadn’t been seen for almost two weeks. The temperatures had fallen significantly since that night out in the front yard with the flying squirrels.

Though the sun was shining brightly, the tops of the mighty maples were covered in ice that sparkled in the sunlight. There was blue sky behind, with occasional wispy clouds floating by like daytime ghosts.

That was a pretty picture too.

I had my first bout this week of wishing for summertime. With the cold air wrapped around my head while I was snow-blowing the driveway, I visualized one of those humid afternoons out on a trout stream.

I could feel that anticipation and the stirring inside of me – the kind that comes when you know it’s going to be raining any minute. The sky is purple, the bushes around the black-colored water are green and bright.

I watch the retrieve of my twirling spinner in the water, moving just under the bank and then out across a deep hole. Here in the ice and snow of winter, I feel that shakiness inside that I sense just before a big trout swims out from the bottom of a stream to strike.

Then I see the gray, papery remains of what’s left of a hornet’s nest flapping softly in the wind as it hangs from a tree in the front yard. I turn the chute on the snow blower and the spray heads over a snowbank and in that direction.

A red squirrel sits in a crabapple tree, munching something and watching me out of the corners of his black, glistening eyes. He doesn’t seem to be concerned that the snow thrown from this loud, rattling machine might be able to reach him.

With the sun dropping out of the sky – leaving so soon after so long a wait – I continue to work into the gathering darkness.

It won’t be long now before the flying squirrels perform their nightly magic trick and come swirling like smoke back down the trees to the feeders.

The temperature is dropping fast. The sound of a train whistle whines off in the distance. Taillights from a passing pickup truck disappear around the corner. The exhaust from the tailpipe hangs in the air, dissipating slowly.

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