**Showcasing the DNR: The ice storm**

*“Sooner or later you will find a way to feel like sunshine even on a cloudy day, to feel like morning in the dead of night, sooner or later, it’s gonna be alright,” –* Kevin Cronin

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The sound I heard shimmering through the air was abrupt and loud, like the crack of a high-powered rifle at a distance. The noise was followed by a rushing sound like waves breaking near the shore.

I was standing alone in the cemetery.

The rain overnight had begun to freeze hard on the trees, making this place of longing and loss take on new beauty.

The glazed white branches of the maples and oaks hung down over the statuettes and the stones, casting the whole scene in a grace and goodness that looked closer to heaven than any graveyard I’d ever seen.

I lifted my camera up to take a shot of Mother Mary standing on a gray marble pedestal, the palms of her hands outstretched. All around, there was a cover of cold white snow and the trees were encased in ice.

If it weren’t for the greenery of a wreath adorning a grave nearby, this would look like a black-and-white photograph.

Sometimes I come here to talk to my dad. Sometimes I just come here to be close with nothing at all to say. At the same time, I have the feeling he’s not here anyhow, this is just the last place I saw him.

There was that cracking sound again, this time from the opposite direction and farther away. I looked quick enough to see a heavy ice-covered branch fall to the ground, its black branches shattering and scattering everywhere as it hit the ground.

From down in the town, the sound of the siren at the fire hall left me with an unsettling feeling, like not knowing what was going to happen next.

The more I looked around, the more I saw there were fallen branches all over the ground. The sound of more cracking continued.

I decided to head for home, pausing on my way out for a few more snapshots. I wondered, if the dead are sleeping, can they hear all this happening here? In that moment, I hoped that they couldn’t, that they were instead fast asleep, in profound peace.

As I turned the car around one of the big corners on the snake-shaped road home, I saw more branches fallen along the edge of the road. A tree weighed down with ice beside the garage hung down low in front of the door.

The cracking sound seemed like it was everywhere, across the road, down on the lakeshore, behind the neighbor’s house.

The temperature was dropping, and the wind was picking up.

In the backyard, the most beautiful of the white birches there was bent over like a candy cane, creaking and groaning with each push of the wind. I told her to be strong and hold on, hoping she wouldn’t fall or snap.

I often think about nature in cycles or circles, all linked together, all the tiny parts making up one big thing that collectively understands everything and how it’s supposed to work.

In comparison, I understand next to nothing.

However, I do understand the benefits of wildfires to a landscape, the reasons floods can be helpful or how basaltic volcanoes can build more Hawaii. But I don’t see the natural benefit to ice storms.

They produce beautiful results – from dazzling crystal cathedral ceilings in the forest, to priceless ice diamonds encrusting the branch bracelets on some of the trees, while bending and entombing in luxurious ice small trees, grasses and bushes.

But they also produce such terrible damage – the snapping and disfiguring of limbs, one after another, leaving trees old, weakened or broken irreparably before their time.

The destruction seems like that and nothing more – seems out of step.

Windstorms have similar effects on the trees of the forests. In the span of a few seconds, tremendous giants that have stood for centuries can be cracked and toppled. Apple and wild cherry trees that produced sweet fruit last autumn can be rendered useless in a heartbeat.

During this recent ice storm, the deer didn’t move. Wherever they were, they stayed put. I hoped they were huddled together, staying warm under the thick cover of a stand of hemlocks or cedars somewhere.

I imagine it must have been uncomfortable getting sopped by rain and then sitting out the conditions as the temperature dropped to near zero. I liken it to trying to stay warm outside wearing a soaking wet, soon to be frozen, bathrobe.

The ice caked on the top of the snow seemed like it would be rough for the deer to walk through. Today, when it was all over, I spotted a doe and one of her young ones on the ridge behind the house.

I followed as they walked ahead out of sight. I was able to move on top of the ice packed over their regular trails through the woods. The trees were pulled down low, over and backwards, there too.

In places, I had to lean down almost to the ground to pass, but there were fresh deer tracks from the yearling in the snow in front of me. I found a place where she had stopped and must have stayed earlier, under the boughs of a pine tree.

I stood on the top of a rise, wondering which way to go next. I saw an opening in a stand of spruces. Somewhere up in this area the great horned owls had been calling a couple weeks back. There must be a nest here somewhere, if the tree it was built in didn’t blow over.

From the far side of the clearing, I saw the big doe approaching. She didn’t see me at first. Then she stopped and stared. I didn’t move. I just looked at her. She moved her head from side to side and then tilted it up to get a better look.

Then she snorted loudly and high-tailed it back into the trees, disappearing. It saddens me sometimes how quickly animals can turn and run when I’d hope they would stay to teach me more about them.

On the other hand, I understand.

I’m human.

It is good for them that they don’t become too familiar with me or anybody else.

That makes all the times when I have been afforded opportunities to be closer than usual to animals more treasured and precious to me.

I want to do whatever I can each day to be closer to nature.

I am always an enthusiastic student.

I waited, but the doe didn’t come back. I thought she might come around the other side of the spruces, but she didn’t.

It wasn’t long and I headed back to the house.

I sat in a chair at the long side of a wooden table looking out into the snow and ice-covered yard, thinking that I could barely remember what a warm summer rain looks or feels like.

It had become one of those wintry days when any vision of green leaves and grass seemed like a distant mirage in a desert drifted high with cold white snow.

But the celestial clock is turning, seasons are moving forward, no matter how I might feel. I think when the green leaves of May arrive, I might lie in the grass for a whole week, just soaking up the sun and the sky and the sounds, sights and smells of spring.

For now, I’ll put on a warmer flannel shirt and rest thankful the winter witch wielding the ice storm didn’t drop one of those storied old maple trees on my house.

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