

Days later, an urge came upon me again. I gathered a rake and a wheelbarrow. Then, thank goodness, something happened, and I had to put it off till the next opportunity. Maybe the dog dish was empty, or the kitchen trash can was full. I don't remember the cause of that postponement.

A brilliant thought came to me one cool, cloudy morning. What I really need is chickens. Enough chickens to do the job for me. But then I'd have to clean out the chicken house, too. Ugh! By the end of the day, I'd given up on that idea, and the next day was way too hot for such labor.

Yesterday, I looked for the pitchfork. I found it, but it was a fork with no pitch. The handle was lying broken and useless not far from the rusted fork.

I mentioned to MyKeeper that we needed a new handle for our pitchfork. He said it would be no more expensive to buy a whole new pitchfork than to buy a handle for a broken one.

I explained I've had these urgings to get the job done. I want to get the leavings spread onto the garden before tilling. Of course, if we don't get rain, there will likely be no garden this year, but if we get soaked I want to be ready with seeds. Even if there's no gardening this year, the goat pen still needs its periodic cleanup.

"Hey, that's great!" he said "I've been wondering what to get you for Valentine's Day. That's just perfect!"

This is the same guy who has such tender thoughts about engagements. We were discussing a friend's search for a ring for his fiancé. The ring chosen was a hardship to the budget, and MyKeeper said, "Why do people buy engagement rings anyway? Diamonds are so expensive." I replied that it was a symbol of belonging to each other. He said, "So's a brand on the haunches. Cheaper, too."

MyKeeper was pleased with himself over the Valentine gift idea. "And everybody says I'm not a romantic," he bragged. "Don't you think that's pretty thoughtful of me?"

"Oh, you're all right!" I said, giving him a pal slap on the back.

What a guy. At least I'll be able to get the goat pen cleaned out before Spring.

Central heating...

OREGON – “That one won’t fit,” I counseled from over MyKeeper’s shoulder.

He hunched over the small wood stove, stuffing a chunk of firewood into its glowing red interior. That challenge gleam lit his eyes. It tells me this might be one of those stories to tell the grandchildren. All I was trying to do was offer some helpful advice from my experience.

Central heating usually conjures the touch of a finger to a thermostat mounted conveniently on the wall.

Our central heating was a heater stove in the center of the living room.

We have spent a few years wrestling wood heater stoves. Nostalgia forgets the daily ups and down, and only skims across the peaks. Even so, we still like wood stoves. You can melt things or thaw things on them, warm a fragrant potpourri, or dry clothes on them. You can back up to them when you’re cold.

But, wood fires take up a lot of time. They smoke up the room, blacken the ceiling, sometimes won't light, and frequently don't stay lit.

Their warmth doesn't reach the frosty back rooms until the unregulated heat gets too hot. Then all the doors and windows get thrown open, even if it's 20 degrees below. It's a lot of work cleaning out the ashes, too, and if we leave for the weekend, the fire goes out and the indoor plants die.

The first person up in the morning has to brave the cold until the firewood catches and takes the chill off. They say chopping wood warms you twice - once when you chop it, again when you burn it. Getting a fire started in the morning can warm you, too, and so can the fuming and sizzling of frustration.

I always got a lot of exercise filling the bin by the stove from the stack by the front door that came from the diminishing cord under cover in the shed.

Back to the living room. MyKeeper has me holding the front door open wide while he tosses an already ignited, too-long log outside. I did warn him, didn't I?

These twigs can't really be called logs. We were used to hefting substantial logs into a massive basement firebeast. This stove is delicate by

comparison. It is a black cast iron model with a tall smoke stack; more artistic, less functional. It only accepts wood a maximum of 16" long. That's 16" flat across, with no angled slants that would make one edge 16-1/4" long, and no appendage limbs to get hung up on the narrow door.

Tonight it happened again. "I don't think it's going to fit," I mumbled, sizing up the log with a practiced eye. I, too, have had to wrest a smoldering log back out of the stove and toss it out the door. It makes you cautious.

But there's that gleam in his eye again. My comment must have taunted, "You can't do it, Na-na-na-na-Naaa-na." A few grumbles later MyKeeper stood back, satisfied, and brushed off his hands. "There, see!"

He did cram it in there. 'Course, the little cast iron stove looked like it had elbows sticking out the sides.

Nostalgia Under Glass

Autumn casts her backward glance,
flaming tresses flying
in the wind

Looks o'er her shoulder, finds me
reaches for my fingers
in the wind

Feather light, she races off,
toting all my dreams lived
in the wind

Remembering, I smile and hear
crinkly leaves and echoes
in the wind

Get well soon...

TEXAS—Hi. Yjos osm't Gommu = tjos os <uLee[er/ — oops, what I am tryng to say is: This isn't Ginny. It's MyKeeper. I mean HerKeeper. She's sick this week. She sat here in front of the computer screen looking kind of green. Yuk!Yuk! that's a joke. Green.

I thot it over: shes' not riting, she's not fixing my dinner. I want my dinner more. So I told her, go to bed for awhile. I'll do your colum for you this week. She said I was awful sweet. Awful is about rite, she doesn't know I'm doing it to get my dinner.

My fingers got mixxed up on that first line. you know how if you get your fngers moved over one key the whole centense, er - sentence comes out rong. Rong? No, I think its' wrong.

Scuse me a minit - I gotta go find out where the apostrophy goes in the word "its".

I'm back. She said it depends. She'd haf to know how I used it. But since she doesn't care, she said put it anywhere. Maybe I'll put it here - it's, or its', or its, take yore pick.

I'll be right bak. I don't know if I need all those commas.

She sed this: A very smart lady by the name of Elizabeth Clarkson Zwart said (right here Im sposed to use quotation marks - she said be sure you do!) enyway, the lady was a writer and she said" ,The older I grow the less important the comma becomes. Let the reader catch his own breath". I guess that's how she feels right now, cuz she's sounding kinda wheezy.

I wonder if its sposed to be a comma or a semicolon in that sentence. And how do I make the whole page double spaced?

To tell the truth, I'm not much of a wordy person. Less is better, or it just gets all complicated. So, I think I'm done. Just a minit. I want her to read it to make sure its allrite. She said coud I please - I mean COULD I please turn off the light, uts hurting - er,,, its hurting her eyes.

Shge's laughing! I think she like's it, maybe shes'feelig better!!! I hope sew. I sure don't want to have to do this again next week.

Till next time, its HerKeeper sigh-ning off and wishing you well.

Red Bird

by your color
or by your call
I find you
bright
glorious
red
or
hearing your
staccato rant
search branches
finally
spied
see
you
where you sit
crested and claret
claiming your
place
little
Red
Bird

Photo shoot...

KENTUCKY – MyKeeper and I huddled around the kitchen table to look at the snapshots just developed. The photos were taken during our family Christmas holiday in Kentucky, and most of them were of five-year-old Riley. We couldn't wait to see the color prints of that cute little bundle of energy, my grandson and my youngest daughter's boy.

We planned to pick out a couple of the best and send them off to friends and family that don't get to see Riley very often.

We especially wanted to see the series of pictures I took of Riley playing in the snow. I'd hoped to frame that rosy face smiling out of his bright snowsuit, radiant in the contrast of blue sky and a sunlit snowfield.

Riley was so eager to get out in the snow. Bundling up was a long process because he kept running to the window to see if the snow was still there, and to find out who was out in it already. He wore an excited smile and happy eyes, and was much

too impatient to take seriously the reminder that the thumb goes in the thumbhole of a mitten. He wanted to touch snow, catch it on his tongue, blink it out of his eyes. It was exactly that rapturous face I hoped to capture with my lens once outdoors.

Outside at last, I snapped a picture of Riley brushing snow off Mama's car. Then I got a shot of Riley hunkered down, rolling a snowball. Next he was off sliding on slick ice. That quickly gave way to stomping on it. Then I was jumping back from the muddy splash that made him laugh and laugh. My shutter missed that laugh.

Back to the snowball. By now it was half-way to becoming a snowman, but Riley hurled it like a bowling ball into the ravine, instead. I wiped off the lens and missed capturing the devilish giggle on film.

I got a picture of Riley making snow angels and running in the snow and sitting in the snow, kicking his feet in the air.

All the time, he was laughing and laughing.

When I opened the envelope and spread the pictures out for MyKeeper, here's what is actually preserved for all posterity:

Riley's hand as he raced off around the other side of the car.

The toe of Riley's boot as it left the smashed ice.

Three shots of Riley jumping up from making a snow angel - one where he's pointing back at it.

I did remember calling after him, "Wait, Riley, wait," - and "Could you do that for me again?"

Riley moved faster than the camera's eye could blink, and much faster than me. All I caught was him rushing off to the next ecstatic moment. Next time, I'll have to start training ahead of time. I'll need to get myself up to speed if I'm going to catch anything other than the backside of a kindergartener chasing an adventure.

Dog days of winter...

TEXAS – It is so hot today, I need a cold story. Something to make me think of shivers and icicles. I sit myself in a chair, sweat trickling off my forehead and into my eyes (I hate that). I fill my lungs and exhale slowly. Twice. Snow is what I want to see behind my closed eyes. I try to picture the drifted snow I trudged through with buckets of hot water for my goats.

Too much work. Works up a sweat. Next I thought and gritted my teeth and thought some more until I pictured myself looking up into a thick grayish blanket of snow falling straight down. I felt snowflakes on my nose and eyelashes. No. It's just sweat.

The blistering heat of this time of year creates in me a desperate need to feel cold. Probably my traitorous Northwest blood waiting eagerly for the first hint of fall.

I try again. Moving my chair over a vent, I breathe in the refrigerated air. Ahh, I feel a

thought nudging its way through. It's a cool thought. I see Duchess, my hotdog doggie. She's sitting beside MyKeeper, warmed on a cold winter evening by his body heat and their closeness to the fireplace. Arghh! Too hot!

Two more slow, deep breaths. It's Duchess again. This wiener dog was so aptly named. Until Duchess, I didn't know dogs were supposed to get up on the furniture. She taught me they most assuredly do. Dachshund Duchess was a patient and persistent trainer.

This night is a cold, cold night. No one would want to be anywhere but tucked under mounds of blankets. Sometime after midnight I woke up, chilled to the bone. Something was not right. I figured it out. There was no Duchess plumped in a blanket and lodged in the crook of my leg so I couldn't move.

I sat up, shivered mightily, and reached around in the dark to find her. I called to her in loud whispers, but no Duchess.

Alarm woke me thoroughly. I got up. Brrr. Cold tootsies. Where are those fuzzy slippers? (Oh, this is feeling so good back here in the real world on this hot day). I put on my thick terrycloth robe, still shivering. (I love this part. I'm still sitting in this chair, hanging over a cold air vent, still sweating, but enjoying it more.)

Fumbling my way to the living room, I turn on a light. I can see my breath in frosty clouds. Duchess is not on the big chair, not on the couch, and she's not huddled up to the warm bricks around the heater stove.

It strikes me with a sudden pang. We must have left the poor little thing outside when we retired for the night. I picture her frozen on the doorstep. She's not there, but a blast of cold charges into the living room and swirls into the bedroom. MyKeeper hollers, "What are you doing? Shut the door!" I'm calling for Duchess, calling and calling, but, no answer.

MyKeeper tugs at the blankets. He wants them up over his shoulders, but they won't budge. He yanks at them. "What the...!" he mumbles. He turns on the light. The top blanket is on the floor at the foot of the bed. He plops it onto the bed. It is rolled up tight as a jelly roll. He unrolls the blanket. At its center, not wanting to move a muscle, blinking her eyes and shivering, is Duchess!

Ah, the mere memory cools my fevered brow.

Exquisite Battle

The day after freezing
daffodil greens poke through
rise on stems, smile, teasing

Jealous winter rises
seething, slashing, freezing,
blowing rude surprises

daffodils, flattened, sit
up, sigh, stretch and straighten,
Spring wins, quells winter's fit.

Music of laughter

Nothing more joyous or medicinal than laughter. No laughter better than the laughter of children. Nothing more satisfying than to overhear children laughing.



Dusting with flour...

TEXAS – I walked into the kitchen as Sweet Pea dusted herself with flour. Cheeks. Shirt. Hair. And an extra dab on the nose. Then she slapped her hands together and flour dust powdered the air, settling on the table, the chair, the floor, and the dog.

I spoke to the white-daubed child. She answered, acting as if everyone walks around with flour on their nose.

It's a ritual. She and Peanut were getting ready to make cookies. And it's all Mrs. Barstad's fault. I wrote a feature story about her when we lived on the west coast. She was originally from Minnesota and frequently made potato *lefse* for her family and friends.

She told me the story would best be told by demonstration, so she invited me to her kitchen.

The whole house smelled warm and fragrant as she greeted me with smiling eyes, wearing a bright blue sweatshirt painted with chickadees in the snow.

They are esteemed in Minnesota, she says, because they sing to you on shivery winter mornings.

Mrs. Barstad loved chickadees, and was proud of her sweatshirt. She said it reminded her of home. She loved making *lefse*, too, and watching her guests enjoy it.

She ushered me into the kitchen where a pot of tea brewed under a knitted tea cozy. The teapot was from Sweden, a treasure from her mother and the Old Country. We ate home-made sugar cookies and drank tea while we talked about her family in Minnesota and her years of Scandinavian cooking.

After a bit, she went to the counter where potatoes were already cooked and mashed. All the ingredients were laid out, and I thought how organized she was. Half done already. This would be a snap.

Wrong. Preparing potato *lefse* is for people who have time to cook.

So Mrs. Barstad began. "Step One," she said. "First, you throw a little flour around." She dipped her hands into the flour bin, slapped some on her sweatshirt, patted her hair, and dabbed her cheeks. We laughed. She said there's a reason for this. "Once you've tossed some flour around, you don't mind the mess. And making *lefse* is messy!"

When finished, we cleaned up and enjoyed the *lefse* of our labors. I took a picture of Mrs. Barstad serving up a plate of the Scandinavian specialty. She looked like she was having a great deal of fun. Her eyes glowed, her cheeks were rosy, her hair and shirt were still white with flour.

So, when I taught Peanut how to bake cookies one day, Sweet Pea poked her head around the corner and told me I forgot the most important thing about cookie baking.

She took over. "First," she said, "you throw a little flour around..." The air was thick with the ritual of two little cooks in my kitchen, and laughter.