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Laura Remmerde
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The Dark Heart of Winter

We were in the "deep, dark heart of winter," as my friend, Jan, used to say, out in the windswept, snowbound ghost town, where our little cabin huddled against the winter storms and against the dark.

It was a little too deep and dark for me, on those dwindling days when the light of earth was still a cold fire. When we lighted the kerosene lamps at 4:30 pm, it seemed like ashes were all there was of heat and light. The feathered fire of summer seemed almost forgotten in the gloom, and the phoenix of my hope seemed embryonic, too small and weak to rise out of the ashes of the old year.

Our family had a wonderful Christmas. We read books together at night by lamplight while the snow lay deep on the meadow. By day I milked the goat, replenished fires, filled the lamps. Coyotes sang and laughed and had parties in the forest across the meadow at night, when the full moon lighted up our room as bright as day; and it was so cold I heard the trees crack when the sap in their hearts froze and expanded.

It was too cold to go out. In the morning, when the fires burned low, frost rimed the old metal lock on the inside of our living room door. Transient, translucent etchings of fantastic frost feathers and flowers vanished from our windows as the fire glowed hot in my wood-burning cook stove.

Wherever I looked I saw white snow, gray billowing clouds, black trunks of trees, and, here and there, brown weathered wood of old abandoned houses. The valley was silent. My mind and heart were hungry for color. I began imagining paintings of southwestern

people in colorful serapes, adobe buildings in snow, their windows and doorways glowing with golden light, geraniums in the windows, bursting with vivid colors.

Into this silence and apparent desolation our friends, Jan and Warren, burst, with warm and glowing faces, bearing news from the world outside the valley, bringing laughter and friendship. As we visited into the night, my dreams of escaping to the Bahamas thrummed a rhythm of their own, a constant, almost inaudible accompaniment to the orchestration of melodic laughter weaving itself about me.

So, when Jan and Warren left, I went with them for an impromptu visit to Pocatello, Idaho, where Warren taught English. It wasn't exactly the Bahamas, but I was ready to enjoy every minute of my stay.

I stayed up late into the night to read, visited second-hand stores, went to a movie, and took in every art display the college offered. By the fourth day, though I knew I was reaching the end of my allotted time, I still hadn't called to reserve a ticket home. I wanted an inner impulse to prompt me, something irresistible, not a passive acceptance of "fate," but a summons from life itself.

That night I dreamed of our little house in Whitney. It seemed very far away, hidden deep in a valley in the Blue Mountains of Oregon, and yet I could see my husband clearly through the window. He was lighting a lamp. The glow from the lamp was beautiful, serene, warm. The silence was profound. I wanted to go home, but in the dream I was prevented from going.

When I woke up, something in me yielded, like ice breaking loose to sail down a rushing river. With this yielding, I knew I could wait for spring, though I was returning to the deep, dark heart of winter. The next morning, I reserved my ticket home.

Jon and I live in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado now, in an

area where the snow usually melts rapidly and the silence doesn't penetrate fathoms into your heart.

When I see the Mountain Ball cactus on our rambles, devoid of its pink blossoms, yet faintly green, alive, and waiting in patient grayness for spring, I think of the winter I thought that life had stopped because of a covering of snow, because of silence, while all the time life was at work, quietly progressing toward renewal.