

THE DARK - THANKSGIVING WEEK 2018
by Ruth Wood

The dark approaches softly from all sides. It rises. It settles. My car is my chrysalis, and I am inside - enveloped by the silky dark as it rises, settles, presses against the sides of my protective case. It speaks, telling me to turn up the car heater, that the radio is my friend. I heed that advice, and feel safe in my mobile cocoon.

The dark suddenly surrounds my home, but I am inside - enveloped here by the warmth of the wood stove, and I am quite content to be exactly where I am. I flick on the lights, and the log walls are a blanket of cadmium-yellow hued comfort.

I welcome the dark time of year here in Alaska, although just weeks ago, the day was almost endless. No need then to set the alarm as the morning light through the bedroom window was still announcing it was time to get up. No need to hurry to finish the day's tasks before going out to walk the pups. Now, I forget to set the alarm, and I sleep 'til almost 9:00 a.m. By the time I finish breakfast and feed the pups, it's almost lunch time. I work doing what ever tasks I've assigned myself for the day, and suddenly it's after 3:00 p.m., and if I don't go walk the dogs right this minute it will be dark. And, I'm not so anxious to walk in the dark as I was last year.

I didn't have my trail cam last year and, thus, did not know that grizzly bears were visiting the inlet stream below our house to fish for salmon. This year, I do know; there are 2 - a sow and a cub and they seem to come just as night falls. The salmon run is over, but the unseasonable warmth and the recent sightings in town make me cautious. And, if you could see the damage those 2 bears did to my trail cam, you'd understand my caution. They managed to chew the hard, hard plastic case loose from the strap, carry the camera across the creek, and drop it on the ground where it sat in the rain until I was fortunate enough to find it. (I have to wonder whether they tossed it back and forth to each other before tiring of the game.) Remarkably, the videos were intact, and once the camera dried out, and I replaced the batteries, it still works. The videos. I have one 20 second video that shows one of the bears approaching the camera and just the eyes of the other whose body is hidden by the night. Then, I have 15 or so 20-second videos of bear hair and bear eye and bear blur as one of the bears pried the camera from the strap on the tree.

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Despite damaged camera and increased bear-awareness, I am ecstatic that after 20 years the bears still visit our neighborhood when the salmon run. While I now think it best to be home by dark, it is Oh! so wonderful to be out as first the day softens, the sky reddens, and slowly, slowly the light fades. And, if timed precisely, a home light beckons as I approach the house almost to the minute I would need to flick on my headlamp.

Reflecting on the short days of November and December, I note: I'm a southern girl. It's kind of like Catholicism, no matter how old you get or how far away you move, the South, like the Church, is always with you in one way or the other. So, I feel fortunate that I love the cold, and the dark, and I do not suffer from SAD (seasonal affective disorder.) I love winter in Alaska as much as I love summer in Alaska. I will admit to loving winter a little bit better once the snow falls. Oh the places I can go once it snows! and light reflecting off the snow cover lengthens the afternoon - still dark, but not pitch black.

The coming of the dark means the return of the night sky too. The stars are more magnificent for having been hidden for months. The dazzling display of the Northern Lights delights as much as the very first time I saw them. And, I know I can tune into KTNA, and K* will tell me whether, " ... the Moon is in the 7th House, and Jupiter aligns with Mars, and Peace will guide the planets, and loooove will steer the stars. Ok, Kathleen won't tell me that (although she might sing it with me,) but she will tell me what to look for in the evening or early morning sky be it Venus or Saturn or some other astronomical, not astrological, happening.

But, today, the sun shines brightly, almost blinding me as I gaze across the ice, and even though it is precisely one month and 2 days before winter solstice, the temperature approaches 40°F. So, I must stop writing, shut down the computer, and go outside because I love the light as well as the dark!