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Seasons in Schuylerville, New York

BY JEROMY McFARREN

Winter

As the trees bare their skins to embrace the cold, and the skies grow silvered when the daylight deserts them, I feel a sense of finality. All of the year comes into focus, as stock is taken of all that has transpired. We put away what little we've chosen to keep to get us through the long, frozen months, while making lists of the provisions that will nourish us in the new year.

Extra layers are piled onto beds and bodies. Festivities are planned, allowing us something warm and wholesome to look forward to. The fires we have kindled outdoors in the summer are brought inside. Steaming soups and mugs of cocoa comfort our bellies and warm our hands, turned stiff from the work of removing snow from walkways.

Children spend afternoons on snow days and weekends building men out of powder and secret hideaways to secure their stashes of ammunition, awaiting worthy opponents. Dogs bound through drifts with their tails wagging, gathering white specks along their lashes, as their tongues loll with happiness in the brisk morning light. Fathers and mothers leave in the dark of the morning, only to return in the dark of the evening.

Still, one after another, the holidays march across the face of winter, providing stuffing for cold stomachs, colored lights for white lawns, and warm embraces for empty and loving arms. We make due with what we have gathered during the year and transform a barren landscape into a fruitful and abundant home. The light returns, and the pale sun though missed, offers no greater warmth than the love we make during the winter.

Spring

A crocus blooms around the base of the birch trees in my front yard. Its purple petals labor through the fresh thaw with striped leaves unfolding. A robin's red-gold breast bounces contentedly along the mossy stubble, as it pecks greedily into the earth for its breakfast. An awakening of hunger alights across the landscape.

The maples sprout green and maroon buds, bound tightly, as if they are afraid that the frozen tongue of winter still thirsts to cover branches with its icy kiss. But they will open. Blue jays and cardinals splash their patriotic bodies across the branches, and pileated woodpeckers drum their accompaniment into those trunks that are withering. Soon the chirps of new life will provide the melody.

After the crocuses have blazed low to the earth, the tulips and daffodils will overtake them in both height and longevity. As the sun grows warmer and the days lengthen, a new energy emerges. A long slumber is replaced by the vivid awakening of seed and bulb. Insects and reptiles, too, discover the warmth as they stir in the grasses and amidst the rocks. It is time to feed and to nourish instincts, as delicate webs lace through the bushes, nets cast awaiting the catch.

Children rush outside to enjoy the splendor between the rain showers. The cracking of bats against baseballs fills the air. Lawnmowers grumble as they are revved for the long season ahead. Dogs luxuriate on fresh grass, while cats prowl the fencerows for midday snacks.

Rain takes center stage in the arena of new life, washing away the dirty snow of winter, saturating the seedlings, and feeding the rivers. Our time in the sun is treasured, yet we are thankful for the beauty the waters provide, giving us the promise of rejuvenation and new beginnings.

Summer

Shade trees are a godsend during the thick days of summer, when a breeze is as revered as a divine breath. Our brows glisten and our bodies grow heavy with the weight of an endless humidity. Our beds become rivers, as we splay ourselves for the sleepless night ahead. Even breathing is a chore.

The dogs lay heavily along the wooden floors, their stomachs lifting in rapid succession, and they look to us to end the madness, which we cannot control, from being inflicted upon them. Children alone seem unaffected by the oppression, as they squeal with delight under the tickling showers sprouting from dried lawns.

Roses and peonies, which first delighted at the hot, dry days of July, burn and wither, their petals offered once again to the soil that nurtured them. Violent thunderstorms take their toll, battering and flattening their sinuous stems and denuding them of their beauty.

We seek solace in activities that require little movement. Or else we take refuge in environments fed by artificial air, closing ourselves away from Mother Nature's sauna. Swimming pools and lakefronts, rivers and beaches become meccas for the devout who insist on honoring the time-honored traditions of suntans and swimsuits.

Bright spots pepper the stew we must endure. Cookouts and parades relieve the monotony of the endless days of glare and haze. The scent of wood and coals wafts through neighborhoods, mixing with the smell of hay and livestock from surrounding farms. Pipes and drums mingle with the popping of fireworks, as we celebrate the founding of our village and the independence of our country.

Amidst these celebrations, I long for the relief that is to come, when the kids go back to school and a simple walk through the cemetery with the dogs is more of a struggle than a fight.

Autumn

The leaves are falling. Their decaying scent sweetens the air. Foggy mornings give way to clear afternoons, as the sun begins to lie lower along the horizon. The colors we miss during the dead of summer are rekindled in the trees and the fruits of the season. Chrysanthemums decorate porches, while pumpkins rest along the roadside, in fields, and on farm stands, awaiting their days for carving and display.

Autumn reminds us that there is beauty in every ending, a final fire that blazes against the coming darkness. It is a time of bounty, when the harvest yields its plenty for roasting and canning. We rush around in preparation for what is to come and what we can still cram in. One more bonfire and one more swim. One more hike in the Adirondacks before we trade our hiking boots for snowshoes.

The nights grow colder and we must cover the bushes to protect them from frost. The houseplants that we've treated as if they needed to be let out like pets must be brought indoors. Drafts can be felt along the floorboards, and we know the energy bill will be going up. The dogs must be taken for walks, and they wait impatiently as we don extra layers. Soon we will be walking in the dark with only the streetlights for company.

Children get excited as they plan their costumes at kitchen tables and are warmed with the scent of baking seeds. Pumpkins are carved and lit. The children don't want to wear their coats on Halloween, and we cross our fingers for an Indian summer. The swish of leaves kicked underfoot marries their greedy cries of, "Trick or treat!"

As November sneaks its way through the door, we break out the sweaters and the extra blankets. The salads of summer become soups and stews, and we are thankful for all that we've received, sad to see it give way to the emptiness of winter, but assured of spring's return.



Jeromy McFarren lives in Schuylerville, NY. He is a public historian and a program coordinator in the Office of the Dean of Special Programs at Skidmore College. He is also the owner of 4 Grove Candles in Schuylerville.

Chris Linendoll, contributor of "Good Read" in *VOICES*, was awarded an American Booksellers Association/James Patterson's Bookseller Bonus. In 2015, author James Patterson provided \$250,000 for holiday bonuses for independent booksellers, and also personally chose the winners, who each received a bonus of between \$1,000 and \$5,000.

In a statement, Patterson said the program is a "humble acknowledgment of some of the terrific work taking place in libraries and bookstores. Here's to the communities supporting their bookstore and libraries. Here's to a country that makes reading a priority."

Of receiving the award, Chris Linendoll says: "I am incredibly excited about winning, and it still hasn't really sunk in yet. I am so humbled that someone recognized me for being deserving of such a generous award. I love bookstores and have worked at one or another for most of my adult life. Finding unique titles to recommend to customers, setting up displays, and just generally keeping the store looking good genuinely makes me happy. As for my plans for the bonus, my daughter was diagnosed with celiac disease earlier this month, so I need to go through and completely overhaul the grocery situation in my house. That poor girl has been through so many tests and doctor visits lately; I'm glad I'll be able to get her exactly the toys she wants for Christmas! Also, I'll be buying myself a lot of cheese."

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