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Good Use for Bad Weather

My grandparents nailed two thermometers side by side on the porch of their New Hampshire farmhouse. One registered ten degrees cold, the other ten degrees hot, so that there was always something to brag about. Every morning when my grandmother sat in the rocker under Christopher the canary, writing three postcards to three daughters, she could say, "Thirty below this morning. Seems like it might get cold." Or, "Ninety already and the sun's not over the mountain."

In New England we take pride in our weather because it provides us with pain and suffering, necessities for the spirit, like food and clothing for the body. We never brag about good weather. Let Tucson display self-esteem over eighty-three days without rain. Let Sarasota newspapers go free for the asking when the sun doesn't shine. We smirk in the murk, superior. It's true that we have good weather; we just don't pay it any mind. When summer people flock north to the lakes and the mountains, they do not gather to enjoy our foggy rain. If they're from Boston, they

don't come *for* bright sun and cool dry air; they migrate north *against* the soup-kettle mugginess of home. It seems more decent.

In good weather—apple days of October, brilliant noons and cool evenings of August—we remain comfortable despite our pleasure by talking about pleasure's brevity, forecasting what we're in for as soon as the good spell is done with. Winter is best for bragging. For a week or two in March, mud is almost as good. (Mud is weather as much as snow is; leaves are landscape.) "Tried to get the Buick up New Canada this morning. Have to wait for a dry spell to pull it out, I suppose. Of course, we'll have to dig to find it, first."

Black ice is first rate, but most of us who cherish difficulty will settle for a good ten feet of snow. We get up about five-fifteen, make the coffee, check the thermometer: ten degrees above. The warmth must account for the snow. Highway department plows blunder down Route 4 in the dark outside. We get dressed, dragging on flannel-lined chinos, flannel shirt, sweater, down jacket, and boots. Then we broom one car, headlights and taillights, gun it in reverse over the hump of snow Forrest's plow left, swing it up Forrest's alley, and swoop it down to the road, scattering ridges of snow.

Only two miles to the store. It's not adventurous driving, but it pays to be attentive, to start slowing for a turn a hundred yards early. The store opens at six. Because this is New Hampshire, somebody's bound to be there by five-forty-five. We park with the motor running and the heater on—it'll get warm while we pick up the *Globe*—to go inside. Bob's there with his cup of coffee, and Bill who owns garage and store, and Judy the manager who makes coffee and change. We grin at each other as I stamp my boots and slip my paper out of the pile. We say things like, "Nice weather!" "Bit of snow out there!" "Hear we're getting two feet more!" but what we're really saying is *It takes more than a couple of feet of snow to slow us down!*

Weather is conversation's eternal subject, lingua franca shared by every New Englander with sensory equipment. When Rolls-Royce meets junker, over to the dump, they can talk about the damned rain. Weather talk helps us over difficult subjects. On one Monday morning some years ago, Ned said to Will, "Too bad about Pearl Harbor. I hear there's ten feet over on Five-A." Will said to Ned, "I suppose we'll lick 'em. They say a bread truck got through."

In a boring patch when the weather's mild, we talk about disasters and catastrophes of the past. As a child I heard endless stories about the Blizzard of '88. My Connecticut grandfather belonged to a club that met once a year on the anniversary to swap reminiscences—by which, of course, we understand that they met to tell lies. As I stagger into codgerhood, I discover that my own Blizzard of '88 is the great wind of 1938. I was in Connecticut for that one, which first visited our house in my father's disgust over his new barometer. He won it in a putting contest, and he was proud of it, pretty in its rich brown wood and bright brass. Then when he hung it on the wall it busted; at least it sank way, way down until the foolish thing predicted hurricane.

Most of the time, weather is relative. Every year when an August morning is forty degrees, we shiver and chill: It's *cold* out there! But when a February morning rises to forty, we walk around with our coats unbuttoned, enjoying the heat wave. Next day an icestorm, and we take relief in the return of suffering. It's true—if you don't have to drive in it—that there are few things in Creation as beautiful as an icestorm. Much bad weather is beautiful: dark days when it never quite rains and never quite doesn't, English weather cozy around the fire; wild rains of summer after high heat, compensation and relief; drizzle in autumn that drains color from the trees, quiet and private; the first snow, which steps

my heartbeat up; the first *big* snow, which steps it higher; winter thaw, with its hesitant promise; gothic thunderstorms with bolts of melodrama—we quicken, we thrill, we comfort the dog.

Every now and then we have an open winter, as we call it when we have no snow; it's psychic disaster. It's disaster also for shrubs and bulbs, but it's the soul's woe because we haven't suffered enough. The earth can't emerge because it never submerged. We don't deserve the milder air and the daffodils rising because we haven't lost our annual battles with the snow—fender benders, bad backs from shoveling the mailbox, rasp of frozen air in the lungs, falls on ice, chunks of snow down our boots. The only bad weather in New England is when we don't have any.