Dark Days

Big Sky Country, they called this land on their license plates. I thought the reason was because Montana is a geographically large portion of the United States. But that was before I went out driving on the endless prairie one night. The constellations were big and bright, just like over the state of Texas. But the difference was more than no light penetrating the darkness. The heavens curved down to the horizon, with not a man-made thing nudging the skyline. I didn’t have to look up to see stars. I simply gazed straight out the window, as if the sky were an upside- down bowl with wide flung stars studding the expansive inside. I felt I could reach out and almost touch one. Big Sky Country, they called this land, and the stars declared the truth of the slogan.

I was emphatically reminded of the extent of that vast landscape the next time I was driving across country on the back roads--which is where I spent a lot of my time in Montana. A thunderstorm had been predicted for that day. The weatherman was right on; I could see the disturbance in the distance. Clouds were black and ominous and jagged lightning flashed continuously. The rain was pouring down in sheets, but I could see where the storm began and I could see where the storm ended.

I anticipated a rainbow but the entire sky was suddenly becoming darker and darker. Stopping to assess my situation, I swiveled my head around and counted to nine. Nine storms surrounding me while I remained dry. But they were all moving and I realized there was little chance of escape. Sometimes one doesn’t know which way to turn!

Fire escape. I found the words peculiar in this bleak country when I heard references to the fire escape. What could that urban term mean? Fortunately, I didn’t learn that answer first hand. A fire escape referred to the mountains at the edge of the grassy prairie. When a fire began and the day turned grey with smoke the only hope for the homesteaders was to outrun the fire, literally racing for their lives to the rocky outcrops that offered no fuel to feed the flames.

Another dark place, only a half mile from church, was under a huge tarp or canvas. None of us ever investigated the odd goings-on half way up a small hill on one of the nearby ranches. This was a land of independent, resourceful people, who honored those traits in others and minded their own business. Still, wouldn’t you think someone besides the rancher would know when a complete dinosaur skeleton was being carefully excavated and hidden in plain sight?

We experienced dark days of shattered lives that summer, too. A baby was born, and died, and was laid out in a wee casket only two feet long. I conducted the poignant funeral with misty eyes, as every glance took in Dad’s brown cowboy hat hung over one corner of his son’s coffin, as if all of Dad’s hopes and dreams were being buried as well.

My time there was not to last. I was forced to leave. The youth I had just confirmed that Maundy Thursday gave me hugs and a gift so I wouldn’t forget them. As I moved toward my packed, ready-to-leave vehicle, I stared at the palm of my hand, which held a single key, the only one I owned. The ignition key reminded me that my car was the only place in this big wide world where I belonged, the only place that was rightfully mine. Yielding to my sense of desolation I allowed myself a moment of overwhelming sadness. I had no place to go to; only from. I was leaving my home, my church, my work and my purpose.

The organist quietly slipped something into my hand, a note and a poem. I tucked them away with the card the people sent with me. With tears blurring my vision, light flared in the darkness as I opened my car door and sat down, shut the door securely, started the engine and pulled out from the curb, entering silence and leaving my life behind. After an hour, I pulled off and opened the tri-fold card, gazed at colorful flowers surrounded by so many signatures and good wishes, front and back. I read the words once and then again. This thin gift was destined to be a light in my darkness and a beacon for my future.

Here’s to the woman who knows where she is going and won’t stop until she gets there, who knows not only what she wants from life, but what she has to offer in return.

Here’s to the woman who expects no more from others than she is willing to give, who meets life’s challenges head-on and gracefully accepts both victories and disappointments.

Here’s to the woman who can be successful and self-confident without losing her ability to be understanding and compassionate.

Here’s to a very special woman -- Here’s to you!

Feeling deeply grateful, I pulled onto the empty freeway and headed east. I rummaged in my box of Whitman’s chocolates, a farewell gift from a colleague. As my fingers searched for the dark round piece that might be orange-filled, I looked up at the big sky. I hadn’t known this was the night of the full moon, but there, before me, like a reminder of God’s presence, was the glorious orange sphere rising above the road, traveling with me, drawing me along by its luminous glow. … *Of course! This is the Holden Prayer I love so much*. I squared my shoulders and took a deep breath, eyes riveted upward.

*O Lord God, who has called me, thy servant, to ventures of which I cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden through perils unknown: Give me faith to go out with good courage, not knowing whither I go, but only that thy hand is leading me and thy love supporting me; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

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American Lutheran Church, Baker, Montana 1991-1993