

Tales of Love and Longing - The Longest Night of the Year
Joan Strong Buell, 2008

2008

She walked back in the driveway, her little dog close by her feet behind her. He didn't stray off into the deeper snow, because the times he'd tried it, he got stuck. Above her, heading up the larger road, two friends trudged with their three dogs. They'd called back and forth when they were closer, enjoying the muffled sounds of their voices. She'd grown up in New England as they had, remembering long winters of snow deeper than this.

1943

When you sledded down from the Headmaster's house, past the tennis courts, all the way down to the football field, the climb back up was so long, it almost made it seem not worth it. Her fingers, back in the house, taking off the snow suits and galoshes, were puffy and red. They hurt and itched at the same time.

Upstairs where she went with her brother and his nurse, they had tea with milk and sugar and listened to the radio. There were songs like "The White Cliffs of Dover" and "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas." She worried often that her father would have to go away to the war. And she'd ask sometimes: "Will you have to go to the war?" She can't remember now quite what he said. But she understood perhaps both his yearning to be part of the war, and his realization that because he was a teacher and head of a school, that was the part he had to play.

A few months later, she and her father, camping in a campground just down the slope from Timberline Lodge on Mt. Hood, were awake, sometime in the night. She asked, "What will happen if Hitler wins the war?" After a little time, her father said, (as best she can remember it) "Well, I don't think he will. But if he did, the mountains would still be here, and the meadows...."

1953

From the apartment where they lived in Paris, she and her roommate, and the roommate's sister, Chiqui and Lilly Orive, left on a cold day, grey and sleety, to take the train, from the Gare d'Austerlitz, to Austria. Lilly knew all about how to make those reservations, not only for the train but for the Inn in Bad Hofgastein where they would spend the next two weeks.

Lonely sometimes for familiar places, but also enrapt with the pleasures of that time, she skied all day, and in the evenings danced, and tobogganed, went to a service somewhere high on a mountain slope on Christmas eve. When she walked along a road in the afternoon, the old man coming toward her said, "Gruss Gott!"

Coming home to the Solignac's apartment at 10 Rue Jean Baptiste Dumas, she found letters from Tom Buell, whom she'd met just before she left the States in June. Home felt very far away, and yet very close. Now, thinking back, she realizes how her parents must have felt, perhaps trusting in her, but also wondering "How is she? What is she thinking?"

1955

In Bangkok, their son, Tommy was one year old on December 27. There's a picture of her sitting with the little boy in her lap, Christmas morning, palm leaves behind them. They had friends coming in for a big meal at noon time, and they were opening presents, full of that sense of joy and loving, very far from any traditional forms of tree or light, or temperature, or candles.

1960

In New York, the streets between E. 76th and E. 54th are very quiet on a summer night at the tail end of a hurricane. Dickon had been born on Aug. 18th, in Seattle. Minie and Gramps had come through Seattle, and after staying a few nights with Helen and Dexter, went East with Hester and Tom who were then 2 ½ and 5, taking them to Middletown and St. George's where Tom was going into his third year of teaching. Joan and Tom, in Seattle for the summer of graduate study, living with Helen and Dexter, stayed on for a few more days, gaining strength after a very scary time, in which they had been afraid, shocked by complications after Dickon's birth.

Now, a warm, calm night, they wheeled Dickon in the baby carriage belonging to Mo and Helen Kinnan, oldest friends of Tom's from Princeton, with whom they'd had supper, down Lexington Avenue to spend the night in Katsy Thomas's apartment. Katsy, another old friend, was somewhere else.

They'd flown in from Seattle that day, but the hurricane, before the hurricanes had names, had shut down not only the airports but the trains and busses. The sense she had of safety and love and familiarity, going down those quiet streets, that warm night, has never left her.

1979

She was working in St Christopher's Hospice, and had been there since October of the year before, two days a week, as a volunteer nurse's aide. One day she brought Tom, hoping to introduce him to a man she'd gotten to know over the last weeks. When they arrived, and came up to the ward where he'd been, she found that he'd died the day before.

She felt so sad, almost betrayed. And she knew better than that.

2008

Mary Whitten wrote today about friends who are shoveling out her sidewalk, making a place for Lieutenant Kije, Dougal's friend, to find a place to take a pee. Her neighbor is worried about her grandson who left Haverford, heading to Portland, Saturday. He got as far as Minneapolis, and there he stays. This that I've written above was prompted by how I remember being in places where there was safety but not what you'd intended. People begin to make friends, make do, invent games, find ways to survive. So that's what I wish for you: have a happy Hanukkah and Christmas and all the days to come.