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**Cosmic Raccoon #77, February 2007**

It's been below zero many nights in the past month. When it's that cold, in this old house, you have to leave the water dripping or do without until the temps come up to at least freezing. Often, the intake line to the toilet freezes, because of course, indoor plumbing was unheard of when the house was built. I just can't imagine hiking to the outhouse when it's ten below, which it was this morning, but they did it. There was one instance in the 1930s when the temperature went to forty below and stayed there for a week. I'm starting to think, being officially an old person, that warm climates in the winter might not be such a bad idea. At least there aren't daily close calls with hypothermia and frostbite.

Perhaps we are not facing a crisis of global warming so much as a crisis of global cooling, another mini-Ice age, and we will all become God's frozen people, like mastodons with buttercups in their mouths in some cataclysmic flash freeze. Every morning when I wake up and have running water to make coffee, I am grateful. Every night when I have wood to burn in the stove, I am ecstatic.

However, I discovered that spectacular astronomical observations can be had at very little cost by standing up suddenly beneath an open kitchen cabinet door. It makes your forehead particularly memorable because of the large, golf-ball sized lump produced just before you teach a class at the local college.

In another close call, and pardon my diversion but I have to preface the story with the fact that Henry goes to great lengths to protect me from wildlife of all kinds, and recently captured, with grass still in its mouth, a substantial mole who looked every bit as surprised as the state treasurer of New Mexico who was recently caught and sentenced doing some nasty stuff. Early one morning just as the sun came up, Henry took after a skunk and had a close encounter of the smelly kind, the first in many years. He's getting old, and slower, and we had a few moments of close bonding with a spray bottle loaded with Dr. Bronner's Peppermint Soap which, I tell you, is the best thing since WD40. It could have been worse. Some of you may remember the night that Mr. Skunk actually came INTO the house. That's what I call a close call. Well, to end this little saga, after I got Henry sprayed down, I looked out front and there, on the first step of the porch, was a FOX. In all my years here I've never seen a fox. It was quite astonishing. This must mean something. I just don't know what. I caught the wafting scent of skunk as the fox actually smiled at me from the first step of the front porch.

On a less olfactory note, my class at Fort Lewis filled up and I can now confidently predict the weather, and whether or not there will be a massive whiteout and snowstorm going over the hill at Hesperus, by the enrollment in my class. But that's why God made four-wheel drive, and so aside from it taking an hour (instead of the usual thirty minutes) things turned out fine.

I do so love teaching my little course in Writing and Illustrating Children's Books. It is one of the rare moments since I closed the bookstore, when I can feel connected to picture books, my first love. One of the neatest new books you might consider buying, or at least checking out of the library is by Linda Kranz, called ONLY ONE YOU. The story line is basically: in all the millions of years of the world, and all the millions of people in each of those years, there is and always will be only one YOU. To illustrate, Linda indulged in her favorite hobby: painting rocks, all delicately decorated in highly imaginative and intricate designs but each slightly different. Painting rocks, Linda Kranz style would be a fun way for kids (and grownups) to pass the snowy days. Can you tell I am tired of snow and cold? Whenever it gets to zero, my hot water line freezes, and until the south wall reaches 30 degrees, I have to revert to hot water on the stove. It's getting old, let me tell you, but the pipes haven't broken, so it's just a close call.

In another close call, I was under the impression that I was ducking and running from stories trying to stick to me, trying to be more like those travelers I mentioned in a previous edition who don't have the problem of messy stories adhered to them. All went well in my efforts to fend off stories until one day at Fort Lewis I went into the first-storey women's bathroom in the Education Building and was thoroughly surprised to hear the automatic flusher SAY something you can't quite hear as it whooshed. I suppose it was engineered to scare the pee out of you.

Another close call took place the day I was out of split wood. You have to understand that the only thing keeping me from psychiatric pharmaceuticals is a nightly fire, and since I am too cheap and too stubborn to go down to the matchstick factory and buy a truckload for twenty bucks, I split my own with my own darling sexy little electric log splitter I bought some time ago for \$300 after a run-in with the gasoline splitter I rented from Slavens and which didn't work. After an uncomfortable confrontation with their roving rental repairman who implied that I was an airhead and unable to comprehend an internal combustion engine, I "splained" to him that the firing mechanism, which was tied to the external rotational rebafragus, had sheared off. "I heard it die a horrible death," I added meaningfully. Just to tick me off, this solicitous fellow who had been sent to retrieve the gas log splitter, tried it and almost broke his arm attempting to start it. I said, "It's only a rental. Take it back. And don't charge me for the two hours I had tried to start it and dislocated my shoulder, please."

That was the day I ordered my little red electric log splitter. I have not regretted it for one nanosecond until this past week when I was heaving a log about the size of New Hampshire into the wheelbarrow and a devil in the woodpile threw another one right off onto my foot. After I said "ouch" or some variant thereof, I decided to split the renegade log FIRST. And don't you know, it was one of those exploder types that as the wedge pries its soul apart goes berserk and flies up into the air with a loud bang. So I fell over backwards and the log rolled off onto my foot AGAIN. So this time I took the ax to it and killed it before it killed me. It has subsequently been burned in several comforting sessions. You've seen the bumper stickers "Don't Mess With Texas"? Well, I've got one now-"Don't mess with middle aged women. They may be out of estrogen but they're not out of bullets."

Among my reading discoveries this month (mostly Bill Bryson) I found that more Americans can name all the Simpsons than the rights guaranteed to you by the first amendment. This is really quite disturbing. Maybe we should require some sort of demonstration of constitutional literacy before we let these people vote. I haven't read much lately (except Bill Bryson) because I've been editing. My favorite Bill Bryson is I'm A Stranger Here Myself: Notes on Coming Back to America After Twenty Years. That's kind of like living in Mancos, where you only have to go to America once in a while.

I finished editing "The Only Thing Better Than Living in Mancos .CHOCOLATE" cookbook which is filled with yummy and funny contributions sent by dear and wonderful raccoon readers. It has been my observation that every cookbook has ONE particular recipe that sells it, sets it off from all others. In my Recipes for Reading, it's the Kitty Litter Cake. In this one, there are TWO- the Chocolate Sauerkraut Cake and Chocolate Armpit Hairs, both sent in by Raccoon Readers. And of course there are "regular" recipes as well, everything from cakes and pies to cookies and candy. Even chocolate chicken and Jack Daniel's Chocolate Topsy Cake. This is a fundraiser for the Library, and will first be sold at the Valentine's Bake Sale, but you raccoons get first dibs if you want a copy, for only \$5 (add \$2 for postage and mailer). It is very handsome, too, because of the cover done by Jean Talafus, also from Mancos.

On a broader time scale, I have evidence that spring is coming early. First of all, I saw a B-57, one of those big fat flies with little teensy wings that barely seem adequate to the challenges of flight. It was lumbering along at eye level at one mile per hour. The B-57 always comes six weeks before spring. So be forewarned.

Another harbinger of spring besides Henry and the aforementioned mole was that the seed catalogs started coming in earnest. I only got a few of them because the grasshoppers are reading them first, but they are the surest sign of hope of a coming spring since God invented babies. That and the fox, I must confess, are sure markers of an early spring.

I suspect the seasons are all confused by the government's sinister plot to combine Lincoln's birthday celebration with Washington's birthday celebration into President's Day, when we are supposed to celebrate ALL the presidents, even William Henry Harrison who refused to wear a coat to his inauguration and died 30 days later, or Grover Cleveland who did nothing at all, or Zachary Taylor who evidently didn't even go to the office for four years. I'd rather have the cherry tree myth and the Honest Abe holidays back. Then spring would know when to come, I bet.

In a follow up report on the orange cat, I have to report that it has come back. I am totally and ineffably mystified where a cat goes to survive sub-zero temperatures for twenty days in a row, but after much fussing on the part of Merecat, I noticed that the dog food was being eaten very quickly, and put two and two together and it equaled one orange cat. I have no idea what this means, but am certain it does mean something.

Henry is also sure it means something. Now that the snow fall has reached the ten inch level, I have to stomp down little tunnels for the dogs to run in. Henry goes out with the greatest trepidation because he is, how do we tastefully say this, well endowed but low-slung. Youch. It has snowed about nonstop the past day, and the white is quite wonderful. But there was a terrible noise in the middle of the night, like a fawn being ripped apart or something, and even Henry and Emily stayed very close to the porch. Maybe it was the chupacabra. Or the UFOs. But it was weird and evil sounding, like when the ice on the river breaks up in spring and it groans and grumbles. Or like when you stand up under an open cabinet door and get to see the rings of Saturn close up and personal.

Until next month, stay warm. And if you want a chocolate cookbook send \$7 to Friends of the Library, Box 844, Mancos, CO 81328. Although it would be fun to see if the letter gets here addressed to Center of the Known Universe, 81328 USA. NEWSFLASH: I don't know whether it was the cold, or something else, but any chocolate recipes you sent to [cookbook@mancosfriends.org](mailto:cookbook@mancosfriends.org) disappeared into the ozone. The webmaster said they SHOULD have forwarded to me but they didn't. So, if you did send some to that address, please resend them to me directly for the next edition.

Thanks.