

Winter

Twenty winters have passed since we moved to Southern California, and my blood - thin to start with - has only gotten runnier. I know this because we are spending a few weeks this December in the Pacific Northwest. We packed our winter coats, sweaters, long-sleeved shirts, gloves, hats, and scarves. Temperatures here have been in the low to mid thirties, hovering around freezing at night. It even got into the 20's last night. Today we went for a walk. Decked out in my L.L. Bean boots (unlined, yes, but I was wearing heavy wool socks), undershirt, long-sleeved shirt, cotton sweater, winter coat, jeans, wool hat, gloves and a scarf, I froze - even though I was hiking. I kept thinking, how do people do this?

Williamstown

Yet, not that long ago, I was one of those people. I remember living in Williamstown, Massachusetts in the early 1980s when my children were toddlers. The college house we lived in had lots of character, but it did not have a stitch of insulation. Each winter frost coated the wallpaper of the back bedroom, a room we affectionately called Siberia. From late autumn until spring we closed off this room from the rest of the house to keep the other rooms as warm as possible.

The kitchen pipes were located on an outside wall and one day they burst. Even though we were spending more than we could afford to heat the house, including the kitchen, the college building and grounds people who came to fix them advised us to raise the heat. They removed the plaster wall, leaving the pipes exposed to the inside heat and us exposed to the outside frigid weather. Now, that was cold! I remember thinking how delightful it was when temps rose to the freezing point. In fact, we had a rule that we wouldn't take the kids outside to play or walk around when it was colder than 10° F for fear that their cheeks and noses would get frost-bite. Above freezing was downright balmy.

New Jersey

Williamstown was beautiful, but it was almost the end of me. We moved from there south to New Jersey. Definitely a step in the right direction, temperature-wise. Still, we had some seriously snowy winters back in the 1980s and 90s. The year we sold our house to move to California was one of those years. Our adorable, yellow cape cod house had a steep driveway. It wasn't long, but it was steep. The road running by the house was windy and hilly. Cars could not be left on the street during snowy weather because of the plows, but getting a car up the drive was a serious challenge. That year, the snow lingered into the spring, informing all potential buyers that returning to the cute yellow cape, prettily situated among tall oaks, might look idyllic, but getting home could be a serious pain.

Orcas Island

So we have left all of that behind. My husband occasionally bemoans the absence of those quiet, magical nights, muffled by gracefully drifting snowflakes. It is my job to remind him of the dirty slush and ice that inevitably follows, but in candor, I too miss it. Our current visit to Orcas Island has reminded both of us how comforting winter can be, especially a winter that is much milder than New England and the mid-Atlantic. Light snow sugar-coats the conifers and mosses, and without city traffic, the sprinkling of snow melts before it can turn a nasty gray. My feet and the tip of my nose are cold, a feeling I had nearly forgotten, but nevertheless, I am enjoying this little bit of winter.

Wishing all of you happy holidays!