

“The Time is Here” by Vicky Starks

Everywhere I look, nature around me is slowly changing and shifting gears. I stand still and close my eyes. The air has turned crisp and refreshing. The rays from the sun are warm on my face, but not quite warm enough to erase the coolness of the air. I open my eyes and notice the color of the sky seems to have deepened into a richer blue. The surrounding trees are ablaze in brilliant reds, deep oranges, golden yellows and rich purples. I feel more alive today, like something has gently invigorated my soul. I smile, slightly nod to myself, and acknowledge that the time is here.

The time has arrived, we are packed, and as we turn the corner and head north, my mind begins to wander back to our fall adventures into the Northwoods from previous years. We travel awhile and finally, there it is! I experience that tingling butterfly feeling when I see the first small grove of tall pines on the right-hand side of the highway; the passenger side; my side.

We continue to travel north. The sights along the way are familiar to me. We drive through small Wisconsin towns and make our routine stops. We know where and how far they are. We begin to see more fall colors mixed in with my beloved Northwoods pines. Vivid shades of reds, oranges and yellows, mixed with the black and white bark of the thin straight poplar trees and accented by the deep green of the tall pines. The spectrum of vivid fall colors seems to explode in mesmerizing color bursts against the bright blue sky. I watch the trees whiz by out my window as we continue to go north, knowing this is only the prelude to their fall extravaganza.

We continue to travel north. Familiar roads finally take us to our partially hidden lane into the Northwoods. We turn the corner with our windows down. I take in my first deep breath of this fall Northwoods air - fresh, clear, crisp, cool, with the smell of pine. We start our slow drive in and are met by a few deer standing along the edge of the woods, aware but not overly concerned with our arrival into their peaceful fall haven. As we slowly drive over the layer of fallen acorns, a sound similar to popcorn popping echoes through the trees. We

take note of how much the young pines have grown since our last visit in the summer. We stop to move a fallen tree branch out of our way. There may be a tree down across the lane, blocking our drive in. Possibly the aftermath of a strong thunderstorm that rolled through. We bring a chainsaw with a sharpened chain, just in case. A fallen tree or a large branch will be future wood for campfires, or wood stove heat for next fall.

We slowly drive into a clearing. The roof of the cabin and the ground all around it are covered in fallen dry brown pine needles. A few small tree branches and assorted sizes of pine cones are scattered here and there. The tall pines stand majestically around the cabin, reaching high towards the sky. They seem to welcome us with a gentle wave as their tops sway in the cool fall breeze.

The birds are very vocal here in the Northwoods, and they seem to be announcing our arrival. The chipmunks are chattering and scampering around as we unpack, and they seem very curious. They are not afraid and will scamper very close to our feet. The squirrels continue their fall nut gathering ritual, uninterrupted by our activity. The deer remain slightly hidden in the trees, but fairly close as they cautiously watch us, their ears flicking slightly and white tails twitching side-to-side.

The lake is calm, showing off the reflections of the colorful fall trees that border it. I remember the fabulous vibrant colors and shades of red, orange and yellow of the summer sunsets here. The summer fireball sets directly across the lake, straight across from the end of our dock. But this time of year, the sun sets far over to the left shoreline, and the spectacular sunsets of summer hold their place in my memory. Those vibrant colors of red, orange and yellow this time of year belong to the leaves. The sun sets early evening in the fall. Darkness quickly follows the sunset. And the temperature drops quickly.

We build a fire in the cast iron woodstove. It doesn't take long for the crackling fire to take away the chill and set a cozy warm and euphoric atmosphere in our small cabin in the Northwoods. This is my happy place. The smoke calmly rises from the chimney outside and settles into the cool fall Northwoods air. The smell of the wood-burning smoke combined with the scent of the pines creates a unique aromatic earthy smell that belongs solely to the Northwoods.

The sun rises and the Northwoods awakens, usually beginning with the harsh-sounding caws of the crow. The morning air is crisp. The bright red, yellow and orange leaves are speckled with water droplets. I look closely and wonder if they were left there from a light rain over night, or from the cool, damp, deep-woods dew?

I like to experience the Northwoods through the eyes of the wildlife. They are busy preparing to survive the cold harsh Northwoods winter that is soon to arrive. I take the time to watch and observe them. A bald eagle soars over the lake, eyes keenly fixed on the water, looking for a breakfast catch. If I am lucky, I may still hear the mournful cry of the loon this time of year. My ears are always sharply tuned in. The coal black squirrel can be seen darting here, here, everywhere. He scampers fast and is very elusive. I can sometimes smell the musky scent of the red fox, and I know that she is close. It is amusing to watch the turkey flock slowly waddle as they parade down the lane. There's a good chance the coyote is watching nearby with a very keen eye. I watch the squirrels jump from branch to branch to branch at the top of the tall pines, like chattering and chirping trapeze artists. They may scold us occasionally, telling us our presence interrupts their peace and quiet of Northwoods paradise. I notice that the deer are darker in color this time of year, which camouflages them in the shadows of the woods. If I am lucky, I may experience the thrill of watching two young bucks sparring to test their strength and establish dominance. The deer seem much more skittish and reclusive now, and I believe they are preparing themselves to survive the upcoming hunting season that is rapidly approaching.

The acorns continue their fall from the oak trees high above. I hear the thud, crack or ping sounds as they hit the ground, the cabin roof, or whatever interrupts the decent to their resting place. I hear the gentle rustle of the leaves, and watch as an occasional bright red, yellow and/or orange leaf floats and gently tumbles as it gradually picks its resting spot. When the wind blows, it may be lifted up and moved to a new resting place nearby. These sights and sounds are part of the peacefulness I find here in the fall. I breathe deep and fill my lungs with the refreshing clear, cool, and crisp pine air. Then I exhale and release any stress that accompanied me here. I clear my mind and am attuned to what surrounds me here in the Northwoods. I look, listen, and breathe. I know there is no need for conversation. Nature has plenty to say and teach me, if I just look, listen and breathe.

Down at the lake, the water remains calm and glassy. The surface is like a mirror, reflecting the passing white puffy clouds along with the bright fall shoreline colors. I try to

capture printed memories of this beautiful panoramic landscape, but it seems impossible to do justice to this natural profound beauty and tranquility through a lens. This time and place are meant to be experienced in person, and saved in my memory along with the stories that go with it. This is Mother Nature at her finest, and in my heart, I know this is exactly how she wants it to be remembered.

It is never easy to leave this place and head south home again. But I leave with a soul that is relaxed, refreshed, rested and so thankful for everything my life has given me! I leave with a renewed mindfulness to be thankful for all I have and to live every day with love and gratitude.

And when the time is here next year, I will be ready.

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