

# welcome

## the gift of darkness

If people will be talking for the next 40 years (as WCBS, the Official Radio Station of the Yankees, recently declared) about how, on an otherwise unremarkable summer afternoon in an otherwise meaningless ball game, Derek Jeter scored from first on a routine single, then surely we can spend a few more months talking about the Great Blackout of '03. (Trust me, I'm winding up for a curveball to the subject of holidays.) While the newspapers were busy reporting the dismal condition of the nation's infrastructure—and ignoring our scandalous consumption of energy—most of us were busy noticing the impact of losing electricity on our lives at home.

There was the obvious, from the amount of spoiled food to the realization that we were totally unprepared: no water; batteries dead; flashlights lost; and the candles? Where did we put those matches? That the fire department in New York City had to respond to many blazes that night, a record number of them started by candles, sadly tells us that we have nearly lost the habit—with its attendant safety measures—of, at the very least, dining by candlelight, to say nothing of bathing, or snuggling in bed. Time to reclaim those skills.

Food. A basic. A friend and I crossed Central Park—oh, and what about those shoes impossible to walk in?—and walked up Broadway. What an education, to see how the markets were responding. At Fairway, famous for miles of fresh produce, guards were posted every six feet or so in front of full bins of fruits and vegetables, in military stances, arms across their chests, keeping customers from the food. They refused to sell even an orange. Waiting for the lights? Waiting for the prices to skyrocket? For shame. A few blocks up, Zabar's had opened a street bazaar and was clearing its shelves, vendors on the street cheerfully shouting, "Two dollars two dollars two dollars!" and holding up bags of muffins, fruit, milk, bread—anything on hand. It made me think of the farm stands in the small Rhode Island town I visit in the summer—produce spilling off the tables laden with summer's bounty, coffee cans for the coins and bills you jam through the slot for a dozen ears of corn, six peaches. The honor system. Suddenly I felt deeply thankful

that there were people who *wanted* to sell things, who clearly felt it to be their mission, their livelihood, to provide. I had always taken it for granted that I could buy food.

Company. We made our way to some friends' house, but of course the doorbell wasn't working. By then it was very dark. We stood on the street, hollering idiotically, and flashing our lanterns through their windows on the ceiling of what we hoped was a room in which they might be sitting. Eventually it dawned on us to try the low-tech pay phone on the corner. We were immediately, graciously, invited up to dinner; the relief that swept over me made me realize that I had been feeling afraid. I was thankful again, this time not to be alone in the dark. I was struck by the notion of accessibility—how many ways do we reach out to one another? How do we make ourselves available when technology fails us? Do our hearts fail us more often than the electric grid does? How open are our homes? How welcoming do we make them?

Old-fashioned notions, perhaps. The blackout was useful in reconnecting us to some basic facts of home. It must feel safe, be well provisioned and hospitable. There are always people to learn from. When my son needed a place to live in London last summer, a friend made a call to his friends the Kissins. The reply was warm, generous, and instantaneous. "Stay with us! How could we close our door to someone who needs a place to live?" Naturally, I hope to be able to return the favor someday—though I know that I probably won't have a chance to do so literally. The real return of the gift of such open hearts will be to open *my* door to a stranger, and welcome him in. I'm thankful, again.

How fresh the air was the morning after the blackout. I'm remembering all this as I plan for the holidays. The blackout was, in its way, a gift. It made me see that we should prepare our homes for those times when things go dark—and those times always come, electrically or not. Let's gather together with gratitude for everything we take for granted and with a certain kind of grace in the way we treat one another. Lights out!



Dominique Browning, EDITOR