



*Madelaine du Bois*  
(doo bwah)

Judah A Kessler

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W  
inter had come to The North Country

and with the crisp nights and chill-to-the-bones days, so too, the annual need for fire-wood. You know fire-wood, those neatly stacked rectangles of forest and road-side remains after the local department of towns clear the gutters, gullies and trenches of trees and branches felled from old age or because they threaten power lines along the rural trail-ways. As folks, mostly the “flatlander”(folks “not from here”) city folk, drive along, they tend to admire the oft-times neat, rectangular stacks, and oft-times think how rustic or quaint it all appears. Here, in the country home behind the stack, live the rustic, stoic, strong and tenacious “country folk”, always busy tending house and barn, yard and farm, the “true American”, sturdy and strong, living rough and never complaining. Survivors against the elements and staunch defenders of freedom and “the American way”. Yes, indeed, so I suppose, we are, or might be. Not all of us, but most, I suppose.

As in all years past, this year's fire-wood had been delivered late Summer or early Autumn while the demand was still low and the price per cord was the same, low. A note on the term “cord” here though. Little-kown fact, and you're free to research this, is that there is no absolute measurement for a “cord” of wood. Canada and the United States have a “standard” measurement and each differs to one point or another. The states of Maine, Vermont and New York have their individual notions on the size of a “cord”. And then there's a “Friendly” cord, a “Farmer's” cord, a “kitchen”, “running”, “face”, “country”, “long” and more cords. Each cord is unique to some degree or another. But just for the sake of now, the generally accepted standard measurement is a stack of cut wood measuring 8 feet log and 4 feet high,

each piece cut to about a 2-foot length or there-about. Unless one is of the aforementioned “stoic, strong and tenacious” type who might trudge off into yonder wood to cut down old and ancient trees and haul the trophies out to an old pick-up truck, one gets on the phone, calls the local “supplier”, either a business or a “local”, orders-up what's forecast to be needed and then waits for it's delivery. The delivery is generally the same: a ruck pulls into the yard, front or back, and simply dumps a pile of the stuff, takes payment and drives away. No, it's not (often) delivered in that “quaint” yet attractive stack. Stacking, like assembly, is required.

As for the stacking procedure and process, here too, there are “standards” and variations on the theme. “Proper” stacking is a bit of an art, a system or method passed down through generations. Lately, I've found that the current generation, the “central heating” generation, tends to be rather clueless as to the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of “proper” wood-stacking. It's all but obvious when fire-wood has been stacked by the “youngsters” because, more often than not, instead of the neat, rectangles seen and admired, contemporary wood-stacking, if done at all, is more triangular. Rather than engage in any real effort to create neat parallel and perpendicular lines of bottom, top and sides, contemporary methodologies consist of laying row upon row at ever decreasing lengths until the “what-ever triangle” or pyramid is complete. Again, with today's technology, wood-stacking can be researched on-line, and, tah-dah, yes, there are instructional videos to help even the most clueless novices. I'll leave that journey to the individual reader. For now, let me just say that I rather pride myself in investing time, effort, eye and energy into a properly presentable stack of wood. Not only is it more aesthetic, pleasing to the eye, it's also safer (for the most part) as it tends to collapse less easily (generally) and requires less space per cord, and it's easier to cover with a tarp, to keep it a bit dryer, protected against Winter snows and thaws and

ice storms and the likes. Obviously, I'm not a "contemporary"... I'm "old". But never mind all that and this. Last item under the matter of "stacking" is that stacked cords don't deliver themselves from the yard or shed into the house where they're needed most. I mean, fire-wood is functional, not decorative (for us country-dwelling, rustic and stoic folks anyway). Not only does it need to be stacked from piles, the stacks have to be hauled into the house, there to be RE-stacked beside the hearth, the wood-stove or the fire place. Yeah, it's that nasty four-letter word... "work". But the alternative, for many of us, to the work, is another four-letter word: "dead"... frozed to death, as it were. And believe me when I tell you that the work involved with stacking, hauling and re-stacking is not with-out benefit when, as the wind slams against the windows and howls through the old pines, when the visibility distance through the glass is all of 50 feet or less in the blust'ring and drifting snows, the warmth of a crackling fire almost can't be beat. I passed five Winters having to go out-doors to warm-up because in-doors was colder. When the wood-stove came into my life, I say, I have no regrets nor resentments when it comes to wood-hauling... That is until more recently when the stacking-hauling-stacking was done for somebody else, and then...

**The stockings were hung, by the chimney with care  
and wood for the week stacked neatly o'er there...  
until..**

I shall call her "Madelaine", for no particular reason. You may read her name as pronounced "MAD-a-lane", for no particular reason other than that's how I hear it.

Dear Madelaine was a widow of a "particular age", born and raised in the days of the fine arts of tending crops and milking cows - by hand. Dear Madelaine was what is commonly referred to as a 'farm girl", growed up in a petite

town, removed from the village which was far removed from the city. Indeed, Dear Madelaine was our stereotypical “stoic, rustic, hard-working old gal”. She could till and turn, plant and raise, harvest and cook the best of food crops and set a “country table” as good as if not better than the best of them. She was wise and learned in the ways and means of “the old country”, complete with some of the finer eccentricities there-of and from. She was a “dear”, a kind and giving person, with good heart and soul and she was, as far as it could go, truly as eccentric as most of her kind and breed. Her eccentricities were many, but for now, for here, we’ll blither on about one in particular, having to do with the subject matter at hand: fire-wood and the stoking of a wood-stove.

Now don't get me wrong, as with stacking fire-wood, methods of stoking a wood-stove differ, most often with little variations, from one-to-one-to-another. But all told, a touch of “good sense” for reasons of convenience and safety are most often is ingredient number one in the recipe, step number one in the “assembly instructions”. Most often. Madelaine, dear, sweet Madelaine, obviously had her own takes on “good sense” as follows:

As had become, in recent years, my chore, I'd not only stacked this year's fire-wood in the back yard, neatly and rather impressively, it had become my weekly task to bring the week's wood into the kitchen and to stack it against the brick wall, on the hearth, beside the wood-stove. Log by log, sometimes two or more at a time, I'd haul the pieces from yard to kitchen, and stack, with care, the wood, not in any certain or particular order, but in a fashion where-by the stack would remain secure, so as not to tumble down, across the floor, onto feet and toes and so as not to cause any injury. Large and small cuttings were inter-dispersed here and there in the stack. But all were stacked neatly and precisely so as to remain stacked. Stoking the stove was merely a matter of taking from the stack, the next available

piece of wood and placing it into the stove. Should there be need for more than one piece, the next in procession was readily and safely available to be removed with-out fear or danger of the entire stack crumbling, like a losing move in a feisty game of “Jenga”. I took care to stack the wood thus, and paid dearly, close attention to the project. I wouldn't want that I should have to take from the stock and toppling the sculpture to the floor, never mind, risking having it crush my feet or toes. And considering that dear Madelaine would, at some point in time, have to attend the stove-stoking, I made certain that the process would cause her no harm either. The stacking of wood in the kitchen was an effort of concern and care, not to mention, it looked quite picturesque as well.

And so it came, one day, to pass ...

Now, the first time I witnessed this very affair, I was, let's just say, taken a-back, rather surprised and only slightly amused. As the days have turned to weeks, the weeks to months and the months to years and the event has repeatedly been repeated, I come to the moment when “share” is what I feel I must. For what sake? you may well and deservedly ask. None, really, I reply and respond. Or, none other than to recount and tell, perhaps to amuse, perhaps to entertain, perhaps to educate. The matter “fell” as follows:

It was a moment not particularly different from any other moment when in the course of North Country Winters, the house had become cool, the fire in the wood-stove had grown almost meagre, and the need for a re-stoking of said stove was at hand. I was seated at the kitchen table, a mug of much-appreciated hot tea steeping darkly at hand. Dear Madelaine took a chill and rose from her chair across from me and strolled o'er to the wood stack there, yonder. For a moment or two, or perhaps a moment and a fraction, she stood motionless beside the neatly stacked bits of logs and likes and with what appeared to be a look of calculation,

stared at the fuel. Me? I said nothing, believing she was merely admiring the tidiness of my labours and I paid, admittedly, only partial attention, just to be ready that, on the off-chance, dear Madelaine might require a helping hand to lift or stoke, and so that I would be ready at her side if/when needed.

Saying nothing and making not a sound, Madelaine reached forward and rather than removing the log at the top of the stack there, she went for a bit jest below half the way down the stack. With one hand on the top of the stack, the other pulled at the lower piece, jiggling and swaying all atop and around it, and then... CRASH! INDEED! There stood our dear Madelaine, with her chosen piece of fire-wood in hand, a look of either disbelief or annoyance, I never was certain which it was, on her face, surrounded by what rather resembled the pile of fire-wood that had been delivered, some months ago, to the back yard. She was, I can report, neither amused nor injured (thankfully she wasn't injured).

“Well...” said I, in a tone of amusement, bemusement, bewilderment and sprinkled with a nuance of annoyance, because I knew it would be expected of me to re-stack the wood and tidy the mess of wood- and bark-chips about. “Admittedly I’ll never understand why, but I’m sure there’s a reason why it HAD to be THAT piece of wood down there to be put into the stove instead of the next available bit on the top of the stack.”

What followed was, in fact, a brief period of silence, what is sometimes referred to as a “pregnant silence”, but it felt more like a “late term”, if “pregnant”. During this intermission, Madelaine stood almost motionless, resembling a garden statue, one arm dropped to her side, and holding the bit of fire-wood she’d chosen and managed to salvage from the wreckage. I calmly reached for my tea and, lifting the cup half to my chin, in a soft tone of voice, to break the silence and what seemed a “freezing spell” in the

room where nothing moved, I spoke, rather to no-one:

“There is a kabalistic numerological value on each piece of wood as it's stacked, I suppose. Some un-seen, un-seeable divine force has dictated that each piece is to be used in specific and particular order and a spirit voice calls out from each log there, to be taken in a particular order. If you listen carefully, with your heart and soul, and have another glass of wine, you can hear the cries 'ME NEXT! ME NEXT!' As I stacked the wood here, my aura had been disturbed or disrupted and I inadvertently put it all in disorder and disarray... obviously.”

I heard the almost palatable sucking of air from the room as she filled her lungs with enough oxygen to recite in one breath. Her tone was one of either constriction or restriction, but heated only a degree or so less than the embers already glowing in the wood-stove at her side:

“I'm a country girl. I grew up on a farm with a fireplace *and* a wood-stove. I *know* what I'm doing!”

“Oh,” I replied, as I slowly returned my tea to the table. “I'm sorry. You're absolutely right. You *intended* to tumble the neatly-stacked wood about the floor then. Success it is.”

I remained motionless at table, ready rather, to duck, should the need to do so present, dodging the odd bit of wood or other that might or might not come sailing across the room in my direction.

Silently, but with motions of obvious determination, dear Madelaine stepped to the side of the wood-stove, opened the steel door, shoved the salvaged bit of wood there in, closed the door and left the kitchen.

She said nothing for the remainder of the day into evening, about the incident or much else, for that matter. She did,

how-ever, wage a silent war, shooting pucker-faced glares toward me from time to time, from a chair across the living-room.



Judah A. Kessler was born in Cornwall, in the Mid-Hudson Valley, in New York State and lived, most of his life, in The Bronx, New York City. He has, as well, resided in the Middle East and Canada. He currently resides in Northern New England, on the Canada border.

Kessler was educated at Dutchess County Community College, NY, Elizabeth Seton/Iona College and The New School for Social Research, NY. He was one of the founders of "The New Hudson River School" of art and was an archival water-colourist, producing many works of historical authenticity in conjunction with intensive and extensive research. Kessler was also amongst the member of the New York City Zucotti Park "Occupy Wall Street" demonstration. He speaks 9 languages.

Kessler appeared on Anne Barbano's "The Next Frontier" radio broadcast, 27 October 2011 where he discussed, at some length, the concept of "Working Homeless", those who are employed in legitimate, tax-paying jobs and yet, are unable to sustain both food and necessities in addition to maintaining a home. In a time of #OccupyWallStreet (Twitter hashtag), Anne found two men who exemplify a condition the nation is experiencing... a working homeless articulate guy from a shelter in NYC... Their stories and voices are compelling... (41 minutes)" <http://www.annebarbano.com/audioplay.php?idinterview-21>

This work: "Madelaine duBois" is a short story excerpt from a larger collection of stories to be published by Kessler.

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