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The other morning I woke up, not to the peaceful quiet of a cold, winter morning in the country but to the sound of a freight train blasting through my backyard. To understand my surprise you need to know that the closest railway line is at least three or four miles away. Plus it's been out of business for forty years or more. It was still dark but glancing over at my digital alarm clock's big, red numbers, I register 5:04 just before ... poof, they disappeared.

Another power outage. I was sorely tempted to burrow down under the covers and worry about it later. Surely one of my neighbors would call the power company and let them know we were in the dark. But then again it was 5 A.M. If they had an ounce of sense, which I'm sure they all do, they were still sound asleep on this wild and windy Saturday morning. Like I should have been.

Not to make myself out to be as heroic or even important, I figured if I didn't call it in, no one would. Or at least no one would call until a reasonable hour, when the sun was up and half the State was on the line to PSNH demanding service. The only neighborly thing to do was to haul myself out of bed and make the call. After all, I didn't want one of those bigger towns in southern New Hampshire to get the jump on us. If half the State was without power, it could take days before it returned to our little street.

I fumbled out of bed and found my headlamp. A cool little flashlight that straps onto your forehead, it's made for camping but I use it for power outages. If you don't have one, I recommend you rush out and buy one before the lights go out again. You'll probably look absolutely ridiculous in it, I know I do, but it's great when you need your hands free to find glasses and phone numbers.

Finally, I'm ready to make my call. Poised to dial, I realize that I'm freezing. Afraid that I'll be shivering on hold for ten or twenty minutes, I head back to the bedroom for long johns, wooly socks and the warm, fuzzy robe my nieces gave me for Christmas. Finally, glasses on with phone number and phone in hand, I'm ready.

Anyone who lives in the country knows you need to have one of those old fashioned phones that tether you to the wall for emergencies. Mine is not just old fashioned, it's old. My first attempt connects me to an accounting firm somewhere in the Midwest. Their answering machine politely asks me to call back Monday through Friday between 8:30 and 5:00. Thankfully, my second try is successful. Again, I get a machine instead of a real person. Convinced that these machines are hard of hearing, I always SPEAK LOUDLY and e-nun-ci-ate clear-y. After two or three questions, I shout OUT-AGE into the phone and settle in to wait for a real person. Curled up under a blanket, I listen to muzak and assurances that my call is important. Unfortunately, all the fumbling around had its price and my estimated wait time is three or four hours or maybe it's days.

I read, I doze, I wait. I realize that I have not filled the bathtub with water. I don't have a gallon of soup ready in the freezer. I still haven't bought a generator. I don't have a spare battery for my headlamp. The freight train continues to roar. I wonder if it's too windy to ski.

After about fifteen minutes, a nice lady came on the line to help me. She sympathetically took my information and assured me that help was on the way. I went back to bed and slept soundly until 7:30, waking just in time to see the alarm clock's red digits start to blink. Some days are luckier than others.

Stay warm and safe.

Bon appétit!

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Tuscan White Bean Soup

Warm and wonderful soup is perfect for a wild and windy winter day. Enjoy!

Serves 6-8

- 1 pound sweet Italian sausage (chicken or pork or a mixture), casings removed
- Olive oil
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 1 large leek, chopped
- 3 carrots, chopped
- 3 stalks celery, chopped
- Sea salt and freshly ground pepper
- 4 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 2 1/2 - 3 cups cooked small white or cannellini beans
- 3-4 quarts chicken broth (more or less depending on how thick you want your soup)
- 1/2 cup dry white wine
- 1 piece Parmigiano-Reggiano rind about 2-inches by 3-inches (optional)
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 teaspoon finely chopped fresh rosemary
- 1 head escarole, chopped (or 1 pound baby spinach)

Heat a soup pot over medium-high heat. Add the sausage, breaking up the meat into bite-size pieces, cook until brown about 5 minutes. Remove the sausage from the pan, drain the fat and reserve.

Heat a little olive oil in the pot and add the onion, leek, carrots and celery and season with salt and pepper. Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally until the onion is translucent, about 10 minutes. Add the garlic and cook, stirring, for 2 minutes more.

Add the beans, sausage, broth, white wine, Parmigiano-Reggiano rind, bay leaf and rosemary to the soup pot with the vegetables. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to low and simmer for about 20 minutes. Stir in the escarole and simmer, uncovered, stirring occasionally, until the greens wilt, about 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.

While adding a piece of Parmigiano-Reggiano rind to the pot is optional, it will add wonderful flavor and richness to your soup. I keep a re-sealable plastic bag of rinds in the freezer.

Like most soups, this one is best if made 1 or 2 days ahead. Cool completely and store in the refrigerator.