

Winter's Blink
by Elizabeth Cardno

Energy, pure and powerful surrounds; actually, permeates the journey – weather meets technology – human, mediating travel. Dark and stark, the sky contrasts with the speed and flight of white crystalline particles; to distract. This black is as spacious as it is infinite, expanding as entered, contracting with the propulsion of ice pellets. This nighttime tunnelling of travel goes on forever.

Is there time to blink?

Blinking could be the end? While a visual recharge, it is a disconnect of techno-human power that leaves nature to its own work. The dark line on the right means the road is where it should be - under the car. Good! But, where on the road are we? Check to the left for the white, painted line. Pray it is not old and faded on greyed pavement. The horizontal flight of white, in gusts and drifts, that at times form solid clouds, increases the challenge of storm and drive. Finally, a glimpse!

The sigh is audible and resounds with others in the vehicle. Again, we breathe carefully, willing progress forward, straight and safe. Also, we will others, in their vehicles, to prevent impact, in the blinding storm. Breath is work! Exhale matches the storm's impact. Breathing registers actions as the driver continues to monitor the dark line of the ditch. Any sudden movement might up-end us. Looking to the left, finding the white line, prevents added danger. Watching our speed and for any objects suddenly revealing themselves, front or back allows some sense of relative safety. The back might have to look after itself! A sudden brightening would signify headlights and might be, too late.

Again, speed of travel is checked! Below the normal speed, as required, but not too slow, to prevent being struck from behind or unable to stop for a more reticent driver in front, or one, already in trouble.

Mindful of previous practice and the rural and thus empty roads, coupled with the insanity of negotiating such a storm, the driver computes likelihood of impact and keeps up anxious surveillance of their wind driven, surreal surrounding. Moving forward yet seemingly lost and possibly pushed backwards with the drive of white particles against

the infinite, dark, space; progress becomes timeless, incalculable. There's no opportunity to check the time as humans and machine move on-wards.

How many trips along storm filled roads and so often in the holiday season? Driving anywhere in winter was a venture measured by the monitoring of weather reports and existing snow fall because when fresh, unpacked snow meets gale driven winds off the Great Lakes, the world transforms. Nature holds the real power. Vehicles and roads are but techno-tools, easily overwhelmed. Driving north west was most problematic. Huron's shore curves around creating a local Snowbelt, the experience of which only those from the Maritimes might know. At such times, we live close to nature.

The trip home from a Christmas dinner in Wingham was just such an experience. The turkey was late and as we finished the pudding the winds had picked up so we knew we had to make the dash home. At the edge of town darkness was broken by the flight of hard snowflakes, whipping by the windows. Whispering in the back seat revealed the fear of our Aunt while our mothers' brother attempted consolation. Candles, a tin can or clay flower pot, blanket and chocolate were in a kit tucked under the seat. At the wheel, although young, my brother was well experienced. Driving in blizzards was a required, local skill and survival technique. Added to his skills was the ability to skid a full 360-degree spin and stop precisely where needed, on ice. A practice witnessed on any snowy stop, on the dead-end street, at the side of our home. But such skills and ability were no consolation to our Aunt who had lost her first husband in such a storm. The pressure grew enormous. Anxiety increased! The wind outside grabbed at the vehicle. Nature and humans tormented any concentration. For we couldn't calm the weather but we had to control our stress. The car must function well with driver care.

Of all the rides and drives through challenging winter storms this one remains the most powerful in memory. People in such situations reveal themselves and so we learn of the accident and her trauma and our Uncles capacity to calm and care for her. Our mother became stern and demanded focus on the driving and road. As the elder sister, a trained nurse, she was the strength of the family with proven resilience. On the left, brother monitored the middle of the road and what lay ahead while on the right, I silently monitored the ditch and rear with fingers and toes crossed. In double the usual time,

we made it home. All were safe, if not relieved. But Christmas would not again be spent with Aunt and Uncle in the north west of Lake Huron's bend.

How many other times had the navigator, now a driver, experienced the demands of a Great lakes storm? They had learned how winds and driven snow smothered civilization and normal techno-driven lives. The five-hour drive from the southern climes of Windsor with the first hint of snow in London, might; had the driver been less determined by destination, have encouraged a stop and phone call. But, powering-on, they gave not a thought to communication, late on that afternoon, in the years before mobile phones. Taking highway four, some twenty miles distant and parallel to the great Lake Huron, they knew they must not waste time. By Hensel the road was packed white and rough like the plowed fields on both sides. The shortest route, the county road was closed. Snow drifts formed waves across the pavement. Home was 10 minutes away. Safer - to go the longer way; another 40 minutes, if lucky. The driver studied both sides of the road as the day's light faded.

Undulating ripples of freshly laid snow reveal the road's shoulder and fluff, that had filled the previous vehicle's tire tracks, leave a pattern to follow. But the fluff likes to fly up, upon the window, further reducing the visible few feet, ahead. Now, and if the car, which was small, weighting more than those of today, with speed that was good enough for the driver; only if it can sustain the trip, will the driver manage the unplowed way forward. Clinton! The town is at the tip of a triangle that will allow travel back, some 10 miles to the home, along yet another road.

Hours now seem endless as the snow blasts a tunnel, against the greyed sky; creating the scene of a shaken orb, enjoyed at Christmas. The desire to be home for the holiday, increased. The job had turned hellish and was thankfully left behind while the car loaded with the gifts from the first well paid job, fostered much desired joy. The outskirts of Clinton-town appeared and still car tracks must be carefully negotiated as no plow had cleared the way. The ruts were deeper and packed. Tires must line up and move forwards with care not to veer. Getting stuck was not an option. Not a vehicle was moving! Not this evening, although many were in sight, scattered here and there in drifts.

Darkness made locating the solitary phone booth difficult. Finally found, it was stuffed

with snow. Brushing the fluff, then the ice packed layer off the receiver, it would be miraculous if it still worked. The operator requested the deposit of a coin. Only then did they notice ice also filled the coin dispenser. The coin would not register! Again, the operator asked and then, she demanded. The operator was back in London where the storm was not ragging. The exhausted and exasperated explanation was to a stranger, just doing her job. The rural/ urban divide leapt to mind as the operator seemed unable to conceive of such a situation. A bad storm, a solitary phone booth stuffed with snow yet still working and a driver who was in a “state”.

Finally, she placed the collect call and a faint voice broke through the line. The hello, so familiar, it warmed their stiff and frozen body immediately. Hope, so needed, after the hours in timeless struggle with impersonal, uncaring, brutish, nature was welcomed. The driver could push on, not giving up on the idea of getting home. Now they would sleep well in the bed of their youth. Others would know where they were and what road they travelled. Continuing on and knowing their mother was aware, and that their care, would accompany them, made the challenge more manageable. Why had they not stopped and called in London? They would still be there, that is why!

Hundreds if not thousands of times they had travelled number 8 highway. It was part of the history of opening and settling the Huron Tract; a subject they had researched and written about. The road was mapped in their mind if not in their bones. On many trips they had contemplated the likely hardships of those early immigrants. Halfway along the road were friends. Now, they too would be a conscious part of the drive, as they would have been called immediately. An unexpected guess might happen upon them. The hardest miles would be done with the greatest of hope and love easing this adversity. The operator, who may have listened, would be along too. Reflecting and now giggling about the phone ordeal – it will be a story to tell and retell.

Hanging up the phone, the joy for this place rose as their destination glistened with fresh snow in all its variation. Some was hard packed, driven by winds that pushed the driver away from the magical phone booth, onto the metal of the car and whipped them inside. On-wards, fighting on, the wind pushed as much as tunnelled the drive. It proved the longest stretch, a drive that lasted forever. Halfway along, the driver waved to the friends although it would not be seen. Their home lite up like a torch encouraged the

drive on-wards. Four long miles later and the old, but new, public school came into view on the right. The road had been cleared a while ago and was filling up quickly. Taking the left turn, after waiting at the only stoplight, was a luxury. A snow flooded town; a timeless holiday card and a place that will always be home. Exhausted driver and mother collapsed in the comfort of home. One that had witnessed the same before and all knew it was a part of life in the County called Huron.