Going Home

by Nancy Loewen

Lulled by the steady rhythm of windshield wipers, I drive through frenzied contortions of wind and snow. I deal with the sudden whiteouts and the closing highway lanes automatically, mechanically; though the radio has warned that only the foolish are out in this night of bitter windchills and drifting snow, I am warm in the sheltered world of my car. It is shortly after midnight, making this December 24. Christmas Eve day. Soon I will be home, with my family, spending my vacation on the farm I grew up on.

Mile by slow mile passes by, blurred and indistinct. The drive that usually takes only an hour has already taken over two; I feel this in my strained eyes and in my reflexive, white-knuckled grip of the steering wheel, even while my mind absorbs itself in radio music and random thoughts. By the time I realize that the whiteouts are more frequent, the drifts much larger than they were at the start of my journey, I have entered the final stretch: Nine miles of narrow highway lie between myself and my hometown. In a faint glimmer of rationality I decide that, late as it is, I will spend the night in town with my grandparents rather than attempt the gravel roads that lead to the farm. And so I drive on, slowly, the familiar places of my growing-up years obscured by night and snow.

After some time I see a dim reddish light, high in the air, to the left of me. The grain elevator. Town is just a mile away, and I crawl on towards it until I can no longer see the light.

Another whiteout: Even as I realize it I feel the car shudder into a drift. It utters a quiet mechanical groan and dies. With immediate irritation I try to start it, but the engine doesn't turn over. Again and again I try, my irritation expanding into some feeling large and unknown, but nothing happens. For a moment I sense the electricity of nerve cells as they demand movement, daring me to maintain the slow momentum my body has grown accustomed to. But another message follows, this one slow and plodding: Windchills

are averaging from 60 to 90 degrees below zero. Hypothermia sets in quickly. To leave the car would mean death in only a few minutes.

Weakened by this sudden struggle of nerves, I wait for a little while, then try the starter again. Nothing. My car has lain itself into the snow like a fatigued horse, and there is nothing I can do. I sit still for a few minutes, orienting myself to the absence of motion, and to the strange idea that my body's first, most basic instinct was to run to its death.

A vague, primitive fear settles hesitantly into me. In an effort to dispel it I flick on the hazard lights, but this doesn't help. The red lights dimmed by snow, the boldness of the word HAZARD, seem absurdly futile pitted against the storm outside. Still, I hope for some semi or pickup truck to come behind me, some knight in a shining vehicle to take me home. There is still a chance that my ignorance will escape being found out by the storm.

I wait. No one comes. Apparently I am the last of the foolhardy to make it to this point. In sudden frustration I pound on the car horn, knowing that even in normal conditions no roadside farmer could hear it. It seems necessary to me though—to assert my presence in this endless height and width of snow, to defy the frozen net of ghosts that has captured my car and myself. But the snow blots even my intentions, and around me, the air grows cold.

Waiting.

I put on the stocking cap thrown carelessly into the back seat of the car, for once not caring how it will matt down my hair. I button up the collar of my thrift-store men's coat, wondering about the man whose limbs it had warmed before me, breathing into black fur that seems eager to return my warmth. I unlace my hiking boots and sit Indian-style on the passenger side, my stocking-footed toes curling under the warm heaviness of my thighs. I put both hands into one mitten and slip my joined hands into the other; the motion takes me back for a second to bright days in elementary when I did this for fun, to be a more convincing elephant.

And that is it. In a few moments I have exhausted my resources to keep warm: There is no coffee can, no candle, no dried fruit or chocolate bar. There is only myself, and the air that is starting

to press against me like the teeth of a young dog, and the snow that is piling up indifferently around my chastened car.

Waiting.

My thoughts blow away from me with the abandonment of before-sleep, but I am not tired. I think of my small hometown, once so important to me, lying there in the snow just a minute's normal drive away. I think of friends home for Christmas break, staying up late with each other, talking in excited voices about the discoveries made since going away to school. I think of my family, and to aviod imagining what they're feeling right now, just six miles away from me, I concentrate instead on Christmas: the sparkling tree with my mother's cat sleeping under it, a few fallen and conquered ornaments nestled into soft fur. Old fruitcake tins filled with pfeffernause and almond bark, and the huge box of chocolates my father always manages to buy, guilty-faced, at some obscure pre-Christmas sale. The scent of pine and evergreen, freshly cut from the windbreak my grandfather planted 45 years ago, scattered throughout the house with my mother's home-made candles. I think of my brother's furtive, elaborate gift-wrapping, and the M&M's he stashes away in his room, and how my mother's cat steals away to his bed when there is no more space under the tree.

Nostalgia is sharp as I wait, flipping through this, my mental yearbook of impressions in warmth.

Almost without realizing it I begin singing phrases from Christmas carols, those old songs that have been in my mind since I was five and stood with the other kindergarteners in flannel pajamas, singing to an auditorium of anticipant parents. My voice is thin, blurred by the ice crystals that have formed in my collar. With the stocking cap pulled tightly over my ears, the sounds I make enter my consciousness as though underwater. Slowly, my voice grows softer, fading until it stops altogether.

Waiting.

It's colder now. The heat generated during those frivolous miles bringing me here has been lost, and my lungs struggle with the cold air as if with a foreign substance. I'm starting to shake, too: Blood quivers into muscle, muscle quivers against bone. My

shoulders ache from the hunched-over position I've been in; my jaw aches from not giving in to chattering teeth.

Trying to distract myself, I make an important decision. The hazards must go off. Already the car's battery has worn down, the hazards blinking only occasionally, no brighter or more useful in the snow than frosted jelly candies. I admit to myself that the hope of a truck happening by has slipped away somewhere in the storm, and I reach for the switch, mittened hands shaking, moving slowly as if through layers of thin glass instead of air. After the third try enough grace enters my fingers to allow me to move the square of black plastic. My face itches and stings out of its nest of fur and crystallized breath; my shoulders feel injured and distended. In this moment I'm suddenly very old, stricken with cancer or Parkinson's disease. Involuntarily I cough a few aged breaths into air that is older still.

This frightens me, the distorted—or is it real?— sense of time that is waiting with me in the car. I decide that, just for a little while, I'll listen to the radio: Maybe it will tell me that the plows are out, that the storm is expected to die by morning. Again I push my hand through glass; again I'm startled by how painful movement is, how cold the world existing inches from my body.

The voice of a late-night radio announcer swims boldly through the ocean of my stocking cap. He's talking about some music group, one that I'm familiar with, but so different are my needs that I can barely register what he's saying. And then, abruptly, he tells me that no plows will be running until the wind dies down, and that the winds are expected to keep on until tomorrow afternoon or possibly tomorrow evening. He tells me not to travel. He tells me to stay at home in front of the fireplace. He puts on an electronic version of "Frosty the Snowman"—and the irony makes me angry; in defiance I try to snap the radio off, but my anger has no power in thickened blood. The radio shuts off with the same pathetic slowness that turned it on. My failure depresses me; I withdraw to my hunched position like a child recoiling from a babysitter and here I sit, rocking back and forth, trying to recapture my private world of heat conserved.

Waiting.

The shaking of my body is more convulsive now. Gradually,

reluctantly, I abandon my effort to keep my teeth from chattering; I am simply not capable of it any longer. Haunted by their primitive rhythm, I find myself wondering irrationally if my teeth will grind away and disappear.

Thoughts move through my mind slowly, indistinctly. Each thought, each random image, becomes stratified into a numb hierarchy of layered time. Even the radio announcer's voice has solidified, buried into places very far from me. My thoughts of home, of Christmas, are buried deeper still. After a time I simply stop thinking: It is enough, for now, to keep my fingers and toes moving, to abandon myself to my body's effort at equilibrium.

A quiet peace settles into me. Dimly I begin to understand that this is a celebration, one of wind and snow fully released to each other, to their own wild power. In a mute, helpless way, I am taking part, and for this I am glad.

Hours pass. I wait.

Nearly two years have passed since that night. As I write this, sitting at my kitchen table on a cool September morning and drinking hot chocolate, I remember.

The peace that I had found in the storm, in myself, didn't stay with me constantly; it seemed to fade away and surge back, rhythmically, like the storm. With the gradual lifting of darkness came fear, and anger: I realized that the whiteness, the whipping sound of snow remained, and now the storm seemed to be taunting me. I screamed and swore at my car, the roads, the radio, until my frustration froze into thick tears and I resigned myself once more to the wait. That's how the morning passed: Just as I began to feel sleepy, to lose the feeling in my fingers and toes, nature would jeer and I'd respond with the angry emotion that kept me awake, and fed warmth to my blood. By the time I realized that the anger, too, was a part of the storm that was helping me, it was around noon and somehow the car felt warmer. I began humming Christmas songs again and I felt happy, as if I were in the family kitchen making popcorn balls or setting the table for supper.

Around 2:30 my reverie was broken: Though I wasn't conscious of hearing anything other than the wind, I stiffly turned

around to look behind me—and there was a snowplow, flashing blue and crawling towards me like a grinning mechanical grasshopper. "All right!" I whispered into my collar, elated as a child, and began fumbling awkwardly for my hiking boots. A rescue vehicle was behind the plow; through frosty lashes I saw someone in a dark snowmobile suit lumber through the drifts and pull open my car door through the snow. "Are you all right?" a man asked, and I recognized him as my school bus driver, the man who for the better part of 18 years had daily brought me to my home. "I'm a bit cold but I think I'm okay—hi Ray," I chattered, smiling, not concerned that my lips had cracked and were bleeding. He tied the laces on my boots, bore most of my weight as I stumbled painfully towards the rescue van, set me directly onto the heater and said to the driver "Look what I found!"

And I sat there, still huddled, barely able to feel the heat now blowing around me. Barely able to comprehend that I was slowly moving away from the small world of my car.

They took me to the hospital, where the head nurse took off my socks and mittens and prodded at my fingers and toes amid exclamations of "No frostbite!—How long did you say you were in the car? 14 hours! You're very lucky!" When I got a glimpse of myself in the mirror I agreed: lips covered with dried blood, face gray with strain, eyes strangely bright, shoulders still convulsively heaving. But it didn't matter. What lay ahead of me now was the warmth of letting my family know that I was all right, the warmth of going home for Christmas.

I remember calling my mother. Her voice was tired and frightened, and the elation I felt for her, for all of us, kept the cold out of my voice as I said "Hi Mom it's me I'm okay." The words rushed together because I didn't want her to wait one more instant for the relief, the joy of knowing that this phone call was not the one to fear. "Oh Nancy," she cried. "Oh thank God."

I was told by someone in charge of the emergency CB radio at the hospital that my father and brother had been notified and were on their way to pick me up. They were already in town; apparently as soon as the plow had gone through they had driven on the road that I had been stranded on, and had found my abandoned car. When

I found this out I was struck by an emotion I had never felt before: imagining the sick feeling that must have sunk into them when they found my empty car, not far from the grain elevator where they conduct business. Not knowing if somewhere along the road they'd find—just not knowing. And when they arrived at the hospital, and my dad looked at me and said "Well" in a soft voice, and my brother whispered "Hi", I hugged them as tightly as I was able, trying to make that vision in their minds go away.

Then, finally, through freshly plowed roads and wind that still gusted, we drove to the farm. Although it was still daylight, the outdoor Christmas lights on the bushes and front porch were shining through the snow; I could see them through the scattered evergreens even before we turned in the drive. I saw my mother peering through the kitchen curtains, holding a cat in her arms like a baby, and that was when I truly felt myself to be home: more teary hugs, a warm bath, a nap in the room I grew up in, covered by a soft, fuzzy blanket that just happened to be one of my presents. Christmas Eve supper, with candles glowing all around. An evening spent around the tree, my father's Christmas albums humming softly in the background. Within this gentle warmth, my shaking slowly subsided, and those hours spent alone in my car gradually became more and more distant.

Still, there is something about the experience that lingers with me, something that has entered my mind more deeply than these memories, more deeply, even, than the cold did on that night. It has to do with that essential relationship between mind and body, so elusive to our understanding. It has to do with feeling oneself an ant, with experiencing the vast indifference of nature and still being able to love it. I feel this sometimes when the wind gets cold. And I feel it now, as I write.