

Life in the Refrigerator

A Canadian Winter Chronicle

Being a True and Faithful Account of One Senior Citizen's Heroic Quest for Milk

— In the manner of Stephen Leacock —

It is a peculiarity of the Canadian climate — and indeed of the Canadian character — that we persist in living in a country where, for a solid five months of the year, the outdoors is actively trying to kill us. We know this. We have always known this. And yet we stay. There is something noble in this, or possibly something deeply wrong with us. I have never been able to decide which.

I am seventy-eight years old, a resident of a fine seniors' building on Maple Street, and I have decided this morning that I need milk. This, in July, would be a trifling errand — a matter of slippers, a light jacket, a cheerful wave to the neighbours. But it is not July. It is February. It is, in fact, the kind of February morning that makes one reconsider the whole enterprise of being alive outdoors.

And so begins The Preparation.

I have timed The Preparation on several occasions, and I can report with some authority that it takes approximately the same length of time as a short opera, and is roughly as dramatic. It begins, as all great Canadian adventures must, with the underwear. Thermal underwear, to be precise — the long-legged, long-sleeved variety that my late mother would have called "sensible" and that I call "a personal insult to the passage of time." I pull it on over what I can only describe, charitably, as a body that has seen better winters. The knees creak. The back offers a comment. I ignore them both, as one ignores an opinionated relative at Christmas.

Over the thermal underwear goes a second pair of underwear, of the regular sort, because one must maintain standards. Then the undershirt. Then the shirt — a flannel one, because I am not a young fool anymore. Then the sweater — a thick, honest, no-nonsense sweater, the kind that doesn't try to look stylish and has never been forgiven for it. Then, over all of this, the great wool trousers, hauled upward with the determined optimism of a man raising a flag over contested territory.

Two pairs of socks. This is non-negotiable. I learned this lesson in 1987 and I have not forgotten it.

The boots come next — magnificent, lumbering, insulated things that add four inches to my height and approximately forty pounds to my general impression of gravity. They take three attempts to lace. On the second attempt, I make the mistake of bending over too quickly and am forced to pause for a moment while the room reorganises itself.

The coat. Ah, the coat. It is a down-filled monument to human survival, purchased at great expense and in the specific shade of orange that ensures one is visible from passing aircraft. My grandchildren tell me it is "a lot." I tell them it is warm. We have agreed to disagree.

Then the hat — the scarf — the mittens — (not gloves; gloves are for optimists) — and finally the large canvas shopping bag, because I am going for milk and there is no earthly reason to make two trips.

Or should I take two bags? One is never quite enough, and yet two bags throws the whole operation into the realm of what one might call ambition. I take two bags. A man must have goals.

Now. The checklist. Keys — yes, in the left coat pocket, where I always keep them, except for the times I don't. Wallet — yes. Money, because one cannot simply wave one's arms at the grocery cashier and expect milk to materialise. Identification, because the pharmacy once asked for it and I have been carrying it ever since in a spirit of general readiness. The wheelchair, charged overnight, sitting by the door like a faithful if somewhat electrical companion.

I stand in the middle of my apartment, swaddled in approximately the same volume of textile as a moderately sized sofa, and I am, I realise, absolutely boiling. It is, at this point, perhaps twenty-two degrees inside my apartment, which is the temperature the building superintendent considers "comfortable" and which I consider "the temperature at which explorers from more southerly climes come to film nature documentaries." I am sweating in my own kitchen. The milk feels very far away.

Down the elevator. The elevator in our building moves at the speed of institutional bureaucracy — that is, it arrives eventually, and when it does, it seems faintly surprised to find you there. I descend. I trundle through the lobby, nodding at the artificial ficus that stands beside the mailboxes, an old acquaintance of mine. I push through the interior door.

And then I stop.

The FOB.

In the grand and merciless architecture of modern apartment security, the FOB is a small plastic device, roughly the size of a large aspirin, whose sole purpose is to prove, at every possible juncture, that you do not belong here. It lets you in. It lets you out. It is a tiny tyrant, and I have forgotten it.

I go back up in the elevator. I re-enter my apartment. I search the hook by the door — the hook that exists specifically for the FOB, whose entire reason for being is to hold the FOB, which was designed to live on this hook — and the hook is empty, gazing back at me with an air of innocent incomprehension.

"FOB," I say aloud. "Where are you?"

I pause, because I have just spoken to a piece of plastic. This is, I reflect, a new development. Not an alarming one — I have been talking to the ficus for years — but worth noting.

I find the FOB under a flyer for a pizza establishment that I have never patronised and likely never shall. I take it. I also, in a burst of forward-thinking strategy, place it around my neck on its lanyard, a thing I have been meaning to do since 2019.

Back down the elevator. Back through the lobby. Nod to the ficus. Through the door — FOB applied triumphantly — and out.

Outside.

Now, I have lived in Canada for seventy-eight years. I have experienced cold in its many forms and fashions — the dry cold, the wet cold, the wind-chill cold that meteorologists describe in numbers so large they seem theoretical. I know cold. Cold and I are, at this point, deeply familiar with one another in the way that old adversaries are familiar — respectful, wary, neither one quite willing to declare victory.

But this. This is something else entirely.

It snowed overnight — not the soft, decorative snow of Christmas cards, but the heavy, businesslike snow that arrives without sentimentality and settles in to stay. The path before me is a landscape of compressed white treachery, and the temperature — I have checked — is minus twenty-three, which is colder than my refrigerator. Colder, in point of fact, than the chest freezer I owned in 1994, which kept ice cream at a temperature I considered frankly excessive. The air hits my face — the only part of me that remains exposed to the elements, the rest of me being sealed in layers against the cold — like a very firm and personal rebuke.

My wheelchair, that faithful electric companion, meets the snow with the attitude of a vehicle deeply surprised to find itself in Canada in February. The wheels spin. The chair fishtails slightly to the left, which is the direction of a fire hydrant I have no wish to visit. I correct. I advance. I spin again. We reach an understanding, the chair and I, which is roughly this: I will not ask it to go fast, and it will not deposit me in a snowbank.

I proceed down the block.

The store is four blocks away — four blocks that in July represent a pleasant constitutional and in February represent something that would have qualified as a polar expedition in a previous century. Other seniors, bundled similarly, nod to me as I pass, with the grave solidarity of people who have also decided that the world owes them a litre of two-percent and they intend to collect it.

I will get that milk, I think. I will get it if it kills me.

And it occurs to me, as I navigate the frozen sidewalk with the grim determination of a man who has outlasted several prime ministers, three economic recessions, and one very bad winter in

1971, that this is, in fact, the whole of it — the whole of what it means to be Canadian, and old, and still moving. Not gracefully. Not warmly. But moving.

The store is in sight.

I shall get the milk. I shall also, now that I think of it, get a small bag of those biscuits I like, and perhaps some soup, and — if they have them — one of those pre-made pies. I have two bags, after all.

A man must have goals.

— *fin* —