

Everything was coated with shiny crunchy ice: the sides of buildings, street signs, trees, cars. Roaming around Jeanne Mance Park, we were just fascinated by it all. We stood under trees, reaching up to bat their sagging branches, making them sound like rattling chandeliers.

“I’ve never seen so much ice!” she said.

“Ah, I’ve seen worse,” I told her. “I remember one time, I think it was New Year’s 1988, when I put my back out after flying down some stairs while carrying a case of beer. The bottles slid off in every direction, and it took me ten minutes of sliding along the ice on my hands and knees to gather them all.

“Tree branches were falling all over the place that week too.” I added. “But this rain will probably turn to snow by tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” she said, “I guess we used to have freezing rain in Kitchener sometimes, but never like this.”

Back at her apartment, we played with a drum machine she’d just bought, until I realized that I needed to get home and get to bed—Christmas vacation was over, and, as usual, it was over way too soon.

The freezing rain didn’t end up turning to snow the next day, nor the day after, nor the day after that. By mid-week, the falling tree branches were starting to cause blackouts throughout the city. By Thursday, there was a rumour that Hydro-Québec would be shutting down the electricity on the whole island at three.

It was normally fairly quiet at work during the first week back from the holidays, but on that Thursday it was beyond quiet. Half the employees weren’t there, probably

because the roads and bridges were too icy. For the first time since I started working there, there was an announcement on the intercom in our building. We were informed that the rumour about Hydro-Quebec was false, and that we still would need permission from our respective bosses if we wanted to leave early.

The few people who'd made it in stood around talking about it all.

"Do you still have power?" was the question on everyone's lips. You could ask it of anyone, even people you didn't know, and start talking. All of a sudden, we all had something in common.

My boss had already been out of power for two days and said it wasn't supposed to come back on for at least another two. His whole family was going to stay at his sister's house that night. Shit, I thought, I'd never heard of blackouts lasting four or five days.

"Did you see the guy on our floor, the one with the black eye?" he asked.

I had.

"He got it while walking up to our building. One of those big branches fell on him."

I'd gotten so used to the sound of falling branches that I hardly noticed it anymore, but now I figured I should pay a bit more attention to it.

I wasn't too worried about losing power at my apartment, since it was so close to downtown, which was the top priority on the electrical grid. Sure enough, the power was on when I got home from work, and St. Laurent seemed unaffected, though a lot of side streets were dark.

Throughout the evening, I noticed flashes outside my window, and thought that someone with a very strong flash

on their camera was taking pictures of the icy trees or something. At least, until Carole asked me, “Have you seen the blue flashes?”

“Yeah,” I said, “what’s up with that?”

“It’s the transformers blowing up! The power lines are popping out of them from the weight of the ice.”

For the first time since we’d moved into the apartment, we watched the eleven o’clock news, to check on the electricity situation. We were very surprised to see our black-out leading the national news. They even had a little logo that read “Ice Storm 98” in the corner of the screen, which made us laugh. We’d never heard the term “ice storm”; it made it sound like ice was falling from the sky and hitting people on the head.

Outside, it was hailing pretty hard, sounding like tiny pebbles bouncing off our windows. The electricity went out in the middle of the night, which normally would have resulted in me sleeping right through my inactive alarm clock the next morning, if it weren’t for the loud thunder and lightning that woke me up. Thunder and lightning, I thought, in January? By then, the ice that coated everything was so thick you couldn’t see the pavement anywhere, not even on a street as busy as the Main.

It was a hell of a job walking towards the bus stop that morning. The treelined path to the angel statue was literally knee-deep with fallen branches. While carefully stepping around them, I heard a huge crack as one tree-sized branch landed with a muffled thump in the pile right next to me.

Suddenly, another huge limb came crashing down, and I thought: Okay, maybe I’ll take a different route to the bus stop. But all of the walkways were covered in piles of tree

branches. The paths you were supposed to walk on were now the most dangerous ways to go. I shuffled very slowly over the ice-covered field next to the path and had to climb up the last hill on my hands and knees to keep from sliding back towards home.

It took me a while to realize how different the scene was from a normal weekday morning. There was almost no traffic, and for the first time, the big six-lane Park Avenue blended so perfectly into its surroundings that Jeanne Mance Park and Mount Royal looked like one unbroken landscape. The angel statue looked like it was made of crystal, with inches of ice coating every piece of it, including the wings. When the bus lumbered up, I didn't feel like getting on—I just wanted to walk around the mountain and stare at everything. To board it, I had to cross into the middle of the street, as there were only a few furrows pressed into the ice-and-snow-covered avenue that vehicles could drive along. You would have needed a four by four to break out of the furrows and change lanes.

At my stop, I alternated between looking up at the hanging tree branches and down at the slippery sidewalk as I walked towards work. I wondered whether one huge branch I had to walk around was the one that gave my co-worker a black eye the day before.

Work was a total write-off. Neither my boss nor our secretary showed up. After a while, I realized there were no more than a half-dozen people on our floor, where normally there would have been over a hundred. The only other person I could hear in my area was working a few cubicles over. She was making call after call, explaining that all the flights were cancelled, both airports were closed, as well as all the train and bus stations. I was sur-

prised to hear her say that the border crossings were also closed, as well as all the highways leading to and from the city.

When I heard her say that all the bridges off the island were also closed, I wondered what the hell I was doing at work. It felt strange to realize that throughout downtown, as well as my whole neighbourhood, only the people who lived there would be on the streets. The masses that commuted in and out of the suburbs were stuck at home, and we had all of downtown and the Plateau to ourselves.

By one o'clock it was pointless. There wasn't even anyone in the office who I could get permission to leave from, and whoever had spoken through the intercom the other day had probably not come in either.

I decided to walk all the way home, seeing as there wasn't much else to do. The sidewalks hadn't been cleared in days, and there was only one narrow path between the snow banks and piles of ice pellets you could walk through. If someone was walking towards you, you had to stand on a snow bank to let them pass, which was tricky as hell given how slippery they were. The traffic lights at Sherbrooke and St. Laurent were out, and I knew that didn't bode well.

Sure enough, St. Laurent had finally lost power. It must have just happened because people were still sitting in cafés and restaurants, eating their lunches by candlelight, staring inquisitively out at the street. Many stores had locked their doors. One dollar store I passed had an employee selling candles out of a shopping cart wedged in the front door. They were rather small candles, which normally cost a dollar for six, but now they cost a dollar for four. At least they were selling them, I thought, instead

of locking up the store and having the candles just sit there when people needed them most.

Trudging onwards, I saw no sign that my apartment might've been spared. Sure enough, the power was out, and the apartment was already pretty chilly when I stepped inside. After all my insensitive bravado, shrugging off the so-called "Ice Storm 98," I suddenly had a million questions going through my mind. What would I do? What would I eat? Where would I get food? Everywhere I usually went was closed! Damn this Plateau lifestyle! I thought. I hadn't been in the habit of cooking at home at all, preferring to grab a falafel or a few empanadas or pupusas for lunch or, on the way home from work, a rotisserie chicken for supper. How was it that I didn't even have a loaf of bread in the cupboard or some cheese in the fridge?

At least the phones were working. I left a few messages with friends and took a nap.

An hour later, Stephanie called and woke me, saying, "It's dark and cold in here! I want to do some sewing, but there's no power for my sewing machine! What am I supposed to do, just sit here?"

She didn't know that whole parts of town had been without power for a couple of days already, and when I told her, she couldn't believe that the power could still be out for days to come.

We talked for a couple of hours, eventually running out of things to say. We kept talking anyway, as there was absolutely fuckall else to do. We even started telling each other about our grandparents, and agreed they would hardly have even noticed a storm like this when they were young.

“They would have just adapted to it,” I said. “I guess we’re not so good at adapting anymore though. Hydro-Québec obviously isn’t able to.”

“It’s like Mother Nature’s revenge,” said Stephanie. “But I wish we could say, okay, we learned our lesson, can you bring the power back now?”

I told Stephanie about the big building projects I worked on at my day job and described a photo I’d seen of an aluminium smelter. Huge mounds of raw materials, shipped in by rail, sat at one end of the smelter, and rows of trucks loaded up massive bars of aluminium at the other end.

“And that’s only to get the aluminium into all the factories that make stuff,” I said. “Those raw materials have to get chewed up and regurgitated a lot of times before they become a pop can.

“If the machines and factories stopped working completely, we’d have to make stuff by hand again. Or at least add some treadmills or something to run the machines with, like those old sewing machines with the foot pedals.”

“My grandmother had one of those!” Stephanie said. “I wish I had one of those right now. It would help me stay warm too.”

While we were still on the phone, my power came back on.

“Call me later on if yours doesn’t come back on,” I told her, “and if the electricity doesn’t cut out again here, I’ll cook you supper.”

Now that the power was back, I felt the need to take full advantage of it. I took a long shower, turned the heat up in every room, and went to the store to get food and candles. Outside, I realized how very lucky I was, since

every block east and west of mine was still dark.

I bought a lot of fruit, thinking that it would keep and didn't need any cooking. Cold cuts, aged cheese, a few baguettes. Chips were the perfect choice, since they would stay fresh in the bag, but apparently I wasn't the only one with that thought. There were only a few bags of chips left at the store, and within a few days, most places had sold out of them completely. I'd never seen stores with empty shelves like that.

Back at home, I tried to wash an apple and was shocked to discover that the taps didn't work. Oh shit! I hadn't bought bottled water or anything. I never thought we'd lose water, especially with the electricity still on in my apartment.

Listening to the radio, I learned that the power had gone out at the city's main pumping stations. Luckily, the water came back on a few hours later, but the radio announced that everyone should boil their water due to the filtration plants still being out. I wondered how all the people who had no electricity were supposed to boil water in the middle of winter. If someone could figure out how to do that, I thought, they may as well get straight to melting all the ice that was out there causing us so much grief.

After a few more hours of having the electricity and water back, somehow I managed to completely forget about my earlier crisis mode. I had a lot of fun playing with my cats outside, walking around on the three feet of ice-covered snow in the yard. The snowdrift along the wall was like a little ski hill, and I could inch my way up it and slide back down. I threw things for Bindy and Pappy to chase and they would run in one spot trying to fetch them. I played a game with icicles, pulling one down and throw-

ing it at the ones hanging under the upstairs balcony, seeing how many I could knock down. The icicles were all over two feet long, just huge. The metal railing on the outdoor staircase had four inches of ice piled neatly over top of it the whole way up.

Eventually, Stephanie and quite a few other friends came over. Liora was also lucky enough to have power and was playing host to a number of her less-fortunate friends as well. I'd spoken with her earlier in the day, when all of us had lost power, and she was busy knitting a scarf while we talked on the phone. "This is the perfect opportunity to learn all the complicated stuff," she'd said about her knitting. "And if the power doesn't come back, I'll just keep making more scarves to stay warm." When I spoke with her that evening, she was frustrated at not being able to knit because of all the people coming over.

"I guess you can't just kick them out," I said, "unless you knit them a scarf first!"

I got off the phone when my doorbell rang yet again. It was Derek, who had walked all the way up from Old Montreal. He informed us that all the skyscrapers downtown were finally dark and that cops were absolutely everywhere down there. I had hoped to make my way down to see these dark behemoth buildings for myself, but never made it because of all the partying that ensued. The Plateau was in serious party mode.

Derek hadn't actually lost power and was annoyed because he had a wood stove and was looking forward to surviving easily without electricity. It would have been pretty romantic doing that in his neighbourhood. He lived down the street from the stables where the horses used for the carriage rides in Old Montreal are kept, and he often heard

them whinnying and clomping past his front window.

“I’d gladly go back to the old ways,” he said.

“Maybe you won’t have a choice!” I said, only half in jest.

We were astonished to see, on the ten o’clock news, footage of huge transmission line pylons bent over or completely collapsed, one after another after another. Much of the province, they reported, and four-fifths of Montreal, was now out of power. Repair crews were racing to Quebec from as far away as the U.S. We doubted that such unprecedented and massive damage to the electrical system could be fixed anytime soon, especially when the workers would have to do their job while sliding around on the ice covering everything.

The news cut to footage of a shelter in Montreal where a journalist was eager to report on the desperate plight of worried families “driven from their cold dark homes.” He pointed his microphone at an older gentleman and asked, “You, sir, how has your family been coping with this calamity?”

“Well,” the man replied, “we’ve been playing a lot of board games, and we’ve certainly gotten to know all our neighbours better. The food has been excellent, and the kids are having a lot of fun....”

We laughed at the contrast between the dramatic lead-up and the man’s cheerful response. The reporter seemed intent on digging up some sort of evidence of suffering, but to no avail.

“They should interview an actual homeless person,” Derek said.

“Yeah,” I said, “can you imagine? ‘When were *you* forced to leave your home, sir?’ ‘Oh, about fifteen years

ago....”

We were lucky to have a dep on the corner that was still open, so we did a massive beer run before heading out to see which bars still had power.

The lack of cars on the road was even more striking on St. Laurent that Friday night. You could hear the babble of people walking up and down the street. Everything sounded clearer, perhaps because of the near-total absence of cars and the sounds echoing off all the ice. It was almost like the street fair, but more beautiful, given that it was winter and there was shimmering snow and ice everywhere instead of grey sidewalks and street-fair trash.

I was happy to see that the power was on at the bank machine, but I got a “technical difficulties” message when I tried to use it. Once at the Miami, though, money wasn’t a problem.

“I’d like to pay for the next pitcher, but I couldn’t take out any cash!” I said to the table at large. Right away, someone pulled out a wallet, “Here, take this, go get one!”

The big breakdown was pretty much the only topic of conversation all night. The bar was packed and there was a general feeling of excitement. It was as if someone had wished the Christmas holidays wouldn’t end and it had come true.

“Now we know exactly how to do it,” someone said, alluding to the solution to all of today’s problems.

“I’m not so sure,” I said. “You don’t just pull down thousands of power lines that easily. Only nature can pull that off.”

But they did have a point. It was strange to realize how fast pretty much everything had changed, just in the past few days, and how very quickly we’d all gotten used to it.