

States of the Union

DIARY OF A FREEZE-IN

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WILTON, CONNECTICUT
ONDAY, DECEMBER 17—

MI dream I am on a stalled train. Drifting snow presses against the windows as we sit in the cold car, our bodies hunched and bent like praying monks. The conductor, who reminds me of someone I like but can't remember, tells us not to worry. We will soon be awake, he says.

Even before I open my eyes I know something is wrong. The furnace—that cheerful, rattling heartbeat—is silent, and all I hear is the splatter of crushed ice dropping

from the skies. The warmth in our electric blanket has leaked away, our clock has frozen at 5:27.

I'm the first one awake. I bundle up—can't find my gloves—and go outside to get logs for the fireplace. The world is sagging beneath megatons of ice. A sapling across the pond is bent upon itself, forming a graceful arch, and the woods beyond crackle in small explosions as branches break and trees topple.

Each blade of grass is encased in a tube of ice. As I walk, the lawn tinkles like the crystal chandelier my family had in the dining room when I was a boy. The comforting sound joined to the uncomfoting circumstances draws a shiver from my bones. There is a terror here on my patio, a nonsuburban presence that has no respect for two-acre zoning.

I get a vague déjà vu of a story I clipped years ago from the *Times*. and after I have carried in logs and started a fire, I hunt up the item. It turns out to have been an excerpt from a Walter Sullivan "science piece" in 1962. "Ice sheets," Sullivan wrote, "are thought to have spread across North America and

Eurasia four times during the Glacial Epoch, or Pleistocene. There is no clear indication that this epoch is at an end." Beneath the pasted clipping is a poem of sorts, penned in my finest eschatological manner:

Four times the steaming Juggernaut

*Came madly down the world's
steeper side,
Caught life in full surprise*

*Neanderthals still half asleep
Blinked slowly at the northern
din*

*Awaiting some vast favor, like
weekend guests*

They were buried with the rest

By now the household is astray. Harry and Phil, my sons, are eating a cold, nonelectric breakfast of milk and cereal. My wife, Diane, wrapped in a white serape, is stuffing newspapers into the fireplace. "Now this is an energy crisis!" she says. "I keep switching on lights and waiting for the toaster to pop. Very peculiar."

The phone starts ringing—shivering friends wanting to know whether they are shivering alone or in company. We learn that lines are down

everywhere, most of Fairfield County is shorted out, we are victims—to cite the moving words of the Connecticut Light & Power Company—of “a generalized outage”

Diane invites Tony and Lucille, our weekend neighbors from New York who are this Monday stranded in Connecticut, to huddle with us. We play Monopoly in front of the fireplace, Tony kibitzing fiercely (“Listen to me, Lucille, if you buy B&O you’ll be making a terrible mistake!”), the rest of us happily throwing dice and making deals. It becomes one of those marathons. None of us knows much about real estate, but we know what we like: “I’ll give you my two purples for your two reds,” I say lazily to Phil, feigning indifference. “You must be mad” is his sweet reply.

At 3:30 in the afternoon, just as a lady at the Connecticut Light & Power Company is telling me on the phone that we may have to wait another 36 hours for power to be restored, our furnace starts up, making a soft, warm purr. Inexplicably, we and others in our neighborhood are back on the juice, while the rest of the town remains unplugged. The gods have given us “most favored neighborhood” status.

“Because we’re so virtuous,” I tell Diane.

“Because we’re so soft,” she corrects me.

TUESDAY—Friends who have heard of our good fortune are beginning to drop in for showers and flush-toilet privileges (for the plumbing in our town moves electrically, each family owning its separate-but-equal pump). Some arrive carrying sleeping bags and toothbrushes. Linda MacColl, the youngest daughter of friends Jane and Stewart, has with her two gerbilles who reside in a plastic castle complete with a tower they can climb to get food. Since this is my week to look things up, I rush to the dictionary and learn that gerbilles are “jumping mice” from “the desert regions of Russia.” Some-

thing else to be grateful to the Russians for.

Our cat eyes the jumping mice. Linda eyes the cat. The mice, from atop their turret, eye Linda. They form a nervous tableau.

Apparently the whole town is on edge. The high school, which has its own generator, is being used as an emergency Hilton for the frozen citizenry—three families to a classroom—and peace does not reign. We’re told that some of the younger hostellers held a pot party in the cafeteria last night. The police arrested them, but not before one of the youths had shoved an officer down the stairs. This is the town’s first brush with communal living. “The highest and best form of efficiency,” intoned Woodrow Wilson, “is the spontaneous cooperation of a free people.” Maybe we’ll do better next time.

Tonight I try nickel-and-dime poker with Harry and Phil and their friends, while a half-dozen others sleep heavily on couches and on the living room floor. My teenage opponents play a shrewd game, it is hard work to stay even. By 3 A.M. the only noises in the house are the furnace, the pump and the jumping mice from the steppes. The cat is out, probably looking for a fight. Spontaneous cooperation is not his strong suit.

WEDNESDAY—I may have been unjust to my town. It is true that some of the high school guests have misbehaved, but most of the 700 people who have taken sanctuary there are keeping their wits and their tempers, sipping nothing stronger than Dr. Peppers, and watching W.C. Fields movies in the cafeteria. Everyone seems to be rising to the occasion. The volunteer fire department is working the clock-around dousing fires caused by persons unable to steer a middle course between freezing and burning; the local YMCA is offering free showers and coffee—both hot—

to all comers, and the town is giving away firewood hewn from fallen trees in the Town Forest.

The sleeting has stopped, and the CL&P, our nonutopian utility, is gradually untangling the lines. Meanwhile, we notice that lots of people are enjoying themselves. They reminisce about World War II or about rugged camping trips they have survived, and seem to feel that the present emergency is just another test of their hardhood.

This morning friends called to tell us they had cooked a fondue last night in their fireplace and it was “the best meal we ever had.” A septuagenarian of our acquaintance, who lives on Spectacle Lane, has been burning coal in her bedroom fireplace, though neighbors keep popping in to warn her of fire, brimstone and asphyxiation. “Go away and mind your business,” she tells them from beneath three quilts. “But as long as you’re here, go down to the basement and get me some more coal.”

Phil and Harry are going to a dance tonight, and so, it seems, are all their friends. Our house has become a vast dressing room, and a preening and primping station. The girls are donning new, lush formals, the boys, rented and slightly threadbare tuxedos. Diane finds camera and flash and attempts to preserve “the memorable moment,” just as they do in television commercials, but the battery is dead and the moment passes unpreserved. Will the energy crisis never cease?

Later, we find two corsages still in the refrigerator and a half-dozen plastic shampoo bottles in the bathtub. It must be interesting to have daughters (Diane notices that all the shampoos are for oily hair. Has she spotted a teenage trend?)

We clean up the mess and fall into bed, grateful for the faint hum of our electric blanket. As I slide toward sleep, I suddenly remember whom the conductor on the stalled train reminded me of: ’Twas my brother.