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MY VERY OWN ALBERTA CLIPPER

Blue and white.

After I left my private world of dreams and floated in limbo, the first thing I saw was blue and white. My mind started its memory-journal at that point, and forced me to see where I was.

But I fought it, limbo was so relaxing. The white above me was swirling and falling, swirling and falling. The blue shook; it was square; it branched off in more blue, like an ice spider staring down at me . . . I tore myself away from that thought and drowned in the white again: a blanket, a very, very cold . . .

Cold? Where was I? Was I outside?

My body ached, so I sat up. I knew where I was now. "It's kinda cold in here. Could you turn up the heat?"

"So sorry, but I have to stay awake. You don't want to die, do you?"

"Well, no, not really." I looked out the car at the snow, and looked up at the roof of the car. Did I really think that was a spider?

"Look who's up," said my sister. "Had any fun getting high on NyQuil?"

"Not NyQuil," said my mom. "Dricsomine. It's for his ear."

"What, is it new?"

"Yeah."

"Hey, Mom," I said. "Where are we?"

"Near the border."

Which border, Siberia? "Which border?"

"Illinois-Indiana."

"That far already? I thought we'd have to find an apartment back there." We were lost . . . hopelessly. Stuck in a drift, we had to get towed away. And after they took most of our money from us, they left us to die in the cold. They had a reason when they decided not to call Chicago the city of brotherly love. "Actually, we could have stayed in a hotel."

"Not enough money."

"Of course."

"Besides," she added, "we'll make it home alright."

"What, you mean it's going to be like this all the way home?"

"That's what the weatherman said."

"Yeah, one word: cold." (That was my sister.)
"Be quiet from now on, okay. I have to get us past the Skyway." We OK'd.

We drove: "we" as in my mom drove and my sister and I were nervous. To me we were driving on a sound stage--technicians blew snow around us and they were probably filming it for some comedy show. "Looks like we're driving on a sound stage," I said.

"Shhh."--"Shhh."

I think my dreams were more satisfying.

There was no doubt we were driving, but whether or not we were driving on a road was hard to tell. Mom even said it was the freeway.

"Hyperspace, OOOOH! Look at the stars go whizzing past!" (That was me.)

"Shhh."

We drove, to me always in the middle of a nuthouse rubber room washed with Clorox. Our lights bounced off the walls. The windows were too cold to lean against.

We slowed suddenly, went along at a putter, and speeded up again. My mom muttered something like "Close call."

"I'm... dreaming... uvvawhite... Christmas..."

"Please be quiet, I'm trying to drive."

"Sorry."

The car lurched a little and slid a little, and by some stroke of luck we drove off the road on our own, by way of an off ramp.

Away from the freeway, my mom relaxed a bit.

I was going to ask her where we were, but my nose knew right away. "Gary? Why Gary?"

"Cuz it's there... Check my purse for the gas card, will you?"

I grabbed her wallet from the cave and looked at her credit cards. "Not in here," I said.

"Damn!" she whispered to herself, and then after a pause: "Okay, look in the glove compartment for a little folded-up piece of beige paper with phone numbers all over it."

"As long as you're not kidding."

"Would I kid you?"--"She'd kid you."--(my sister)--"the paper exists."

"Then I'll search for it until I'm swallowed by the Glove-Box Monster."

"How melodramatic; not much chance of that happening."

I rummaged a second. "What's it have on it?"

"Addresses of instant tellers that take my card."

"Don't they all?"

"I wish."
I rummaged a bit more, and then stopped dead in my tracks. "Wait a minute," I said. "Why do we need a cash box?"

"Look at the gas."

Quite the suspenseful answer--I looked at the gas. Empty. "So what are we running on?"

"Fumes."

"Oh, that's cute. And I take it we don't have any money for gas?"

"Ninety cents."

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I wondered what people thought when they saw us out there at one in the morning, if they saw us out there. It wasn't exactly a good time to be driving around.

Cities scare me during blizzards. All the streetlights are on, but nobody's home. There aren't even cop cars roaming around; the whole place is bare.

"Where is everybody?" I asked. "I thought this was a big place."

"It is. But we're still in the boonies."

Guess so, but the Twilight Zone would've been closer. ("The loonies?" said my sister--"Boonies," corrected my mom. They both laughed.) We couldn't see more than five feet; snow was all around us, but the roads were neatly shovelled out. And all of it mixed in with that smell. Oh, God, that smell: like burning refried beans (it came from the factories). I buried my head in my pillow to escape it.

"Smally? Vutt choo collink smaily?"

"Huh?--The smell of refried beans in the air was the first thing I noticed on entering the village. It grew stronger as we approached el loco capitano's hacienda. In tense form, I dismounted my horse, wondering how in hell they could fit a ferris wheel into a health food store. "Brando," said the policeman. "Marlon Brando. Or, in your case: breaking up is hard to do. I said ..."

"... waking up. Oh, good," said my sister to herself, and then to me: "How was Dreamyland, you old drug addict?"

My eyes and back ached. I hate sleeping in cars. Why was she watching me? Were we stopped? I guess so. Where was my mom? "It was dreamy. What time is it?"

"Two thirty-five."

An hour? "God, what did we do?"

"Bought some gas and--"

"I thought we didn't have any money."

"Ninety cents, remember?"
"Yeah, I remember."
"We bought a gallon of this really cheap stuff. Burpinol, or something like that."
"Bet it thrilled the attendant, getting ninety cents. Good thing those guys don’t work on commissions."
"Yeah . . ." She paused. We had run out of meaningless things to say.
I said: "Gas and . . ."
"Huh?"
"Bought some gas and . . .?"
"Oh. Gas and we went to all sorts of weird places trying to find an automatic teller. That’s where Mom is now."
I looked out the window. We were at a bank with some Revolutionary War name.
"Think she found one?"
"Could be . . ." Pause.
Another lack of babble.
She said: "I wonder if hotels take Visa."
"Why?"
"So we can stay in one."
"Oh."
"So, what do you think?"
"Oh, yeah, sure."
"Are you being serious?"
"Of course I am. Why wouldn’t they take Visa?"
"Cuz all the honest card-holders have homes."
"We’ll tell them we’re on a weekend vacation."
The door opened and my mom got in. She looked very tired.
"Any luck?" I asked, knowing the answer.
"None."
A glimmer lit up in my eye. I started my speech. "Well, you know, since it’s dark and all . . ."
". . . No Visa. We cut the card up, remember?"
I felt tired now, too. "Oh, yeah . . ." Well, I thought, that was a pisser, and a quick one at that.
"Oh, well, let’s keep going."

***
Unable to sleep, I offered words of wisdom and navigation for the next two hours. During that time, we crept along at 25 (in an attempt to save fuel), and eventually we passed Michigan City and came into Michigan. Only fifty miles left.

I make it sound simple, but it was really hard. We counted inches, every inch was a new knot in our stomachs, and we sure passed a helluva lot of inches. All three of us were fried by the time my mom made the Executive Decision for our crisis.

Her hope was that we'd run into the State Cophouse if we got off at the next exit, since she thought there was one "around here."

I sadly bid Freeway adieu. It felt like the last time I'd ever see it again.

After that, it was worse than my dreams. Vivid and coherent, but strangely similar. The scene set for us in the real world was much too much like the unreal world. A blur of dark, covered with snowflakes, drifts on the windshield, the unreasonable fear all three of us had of getting buried alive if the car stopped moving.

We found the state police, but whatever they said to my mom while she was in there, it made her look all the more helpless. Whatever they did, they didn't help. (Coherent and vivid ... a thin line between reality and ... falling asleep again. I had to stay away from that.)

In their tiny parking lot, we read a map by headlight because the dome light was broken. We saw names we'd never even heard of. Was this Michigan?

We crept along the road again. Why did it all seem funny three hours ago?

We crept.

"So what do we do now?"
"Don’t ask me that."
"Why don’t we go faster?"
"Because it conserves fuel."
"Damnit, Ian, just shut up. I’m not in the mood."

I looked at her. She couldn’t look at me because of driving, but I knew she was looking in her mind.

"Sorry," she said. "Just don’t make it any harder than it already is."

I OK’d, and tried to curl up and get some sleep; but I already knew that was impossible by now.

"Gas station should be coming up," my mom announced quietly.
"You just know this?"
"Police told me I’d find one around here."
"Helpful ..." I paused. I had nothing meaningful to say.
"Wait a minute, Mom," I said. "Gas stations don’t take checks, do they?"
"No."
"Sorry, just a thought... What are you planning on doing?"
"Writing a check, even if I have to cry for them."

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"So you think she'll get it?" I asked my sister.
"Go in and see for yourself."
"Why bother. Gas stations don't take--"
"I heard."
"Oh."
I thought for a second about how cold it was. "I hope we don't get stranded here."
"I thought you wanted to live the life of excitement."
"Changed my mind. I hate freezing."
"Wouldn't happen, we're such great campers." That was a surprise. Sarcasm from my sister at five in the morning.
"Not much of a night left anyway."
She didn't say anything about that. Disappointed me.
"You think there's bears around here?"
"Oh, yeah, sure. Bears and farmers."
My lips were shaking. "I don't care about being here. I just want to be home in bed."
"You can forget that."
"Yeah... So what did we learn from all of this?"
"What, you mean a moral?"
"Yeah."
"Never wish you could spend the night in some strange place, cuz it'll come true."
"Words of wisdom," I said. "From a ten year-old, no less."
"Here she comes."
I looked over. There she was--crying. The side of our car clicked and a pump started up.
Suddenly I hated my dreams, because dreams never have happy endings.

*Ian Rastall*