

# A Winter's Tale

SIGNALS FROM DAD

By Maureen Egan

Ever since my father died in 2007, my mother has been waiting for a sign from him about when she should move from the home they built decades before. It didn't matter what her children here on Earth said, or that we didn't like her staying alone in a seven-bedroom behemoth nowhere near us. She was waiting for her very own big guy in heaven to tell her when and where to go. I won't delve into the murky and quirky theology here, but thank God my father was never a subtle guy — even from across the great divide.

So it came to pass that my mother wound up stuck in her vast, suburban D.C. house under many feet of snow last winter, on an impassable, hilly street that rarely gets plowed. When I spoke to her that Saturday morning as we were also getting buried in Richmond, she told me that her power was out, her landline didn't work and her cell phone wasn't fully charged. And she didn't have much food. She had a working flashlight and wood for a fire, but the cockles of my heart weren't exactly warmed by this. My siblings and I rationed phone calls to her since she could recharge her phone only by clomping through waist-high snowdrifts in her isolated backyard to dig out her car and start it. The image gave me chills. For a 77-year-old woman who gets her exercise sitting and knitting, this was not a warm and fuzzy scenario.

With the entire East Coast getting walloped, we were all equally helpless, but she was by far the coldest. On Sunday morning her house thermostat read 49 degrees.

That was it. Somebody had to get her. She resisted, saying her neighbors would help if she needed it, but we didn't relent. Within an hour my husband and my sister Erin were driving our 4-wheel-drive vehicle up north on a day when no sane person was on I-95. That's not so different from any other day, except that the plowed lane sometimes stopped abruptly at a wall of snow and sometimes turned into something from *Ice Road Truckers*. As I listened online

to chaotic, journey-back-to-the-Ice-Age traffic reports, the pit in my stomach lurched from fretting about my mother freezing to death to worrying about my husband and sister perishing in a car accident. I could hear the post-mortems: What idiots would be on the road in such conditions? Answer: The same idiots who let their mother weather such weather alone. But I prefer to blame the victim. If she had downsized before, none of these fake funerals would have been happening in my head.

After several hours, Ed and Erin made it to my mother's neighborhood, but they couldn't get on her street.

Trudging through the snow down the half-mile from the plowed Mormon church parking lot was the easy part. Hauling uphill a 77-year-old frozen, hungry woman and her suitcase was even harder . . . and then they still had hours more in the car to get back to Richmond safe and exhausted. Which they did — 8½ hours after the journey had begun.

The joke in my family was that this was clearly the sign from Dad that our mother had been waiting for. But she didn't hear it that way. She grumbled that she would have been fine on her own — even though we later found out that the neighbors who she was sure would have helped were out of town, and her power didn't get restored for eight days.

You're going to have to speak a little louder, Dad!

So as fall arrived and this winter approached — and none of my generation could bear to think of withstanding another winter worrying about her in that house — my mother returned from the beach to a house where

the phone, cable, internet and air conditioning didn't work. The washing machine leaked, wasps and mice were on the loose, and large trees had smashed the backyard dramatically. It had all the earmarks of a well-planned conspiracy, but I swear I had nothing to do with it. Thanks for the shout-out, Pa!

Negative reinforcement is a powerful tool — Mom's hearing has improved considerably. The house is for sale, and she has a lovely apartment in Philadelphia near several daughters and, one can only hope, the sound of my father's voice.

