

Snowbound

by Lincoln Konkle

"It would be a hell of a night to get snowbound," thought Professor Benjamin Brooke as he steered his '76 Chevy wagon out of a skid on to the snow-covered interstate highway. The road wasn't the only thing being covered by a blanket of snow. Winter's first heavy blizzard was turning the southern Illinois landscape into a desert of white sand dunes.

Ben was on his way to Kitt Peak Observatory in Arizona for the annual conference of the Professional and Amateur Astronomers of America. He precariously guided his car down the deserted two-lane road, wishing silently that he had stayed home as he had stayed home for the last 13 years since he had earned his Ph.D. in astrophysics. But a strange uncharacteristic restlessness--like the instinctive perception of spring that awakens the hibernating bear--had been growing inside him during the past months. With the four week vacation in between semesters from the state university where he taught a general Astronomy course, seven days in Arizona and seven more days to get there and back would still leave two weeks with his wife and children for Christmas.

At the moment, Ben's increasing awareness of the vulnerability of a man driving a car on a snow-covered, unfamiliar road was responsible for a more immediate restlessness. Not only was it snowing so hard that his headlights could barely pierce the thick shroud of falling snow, but the temperature was near zero. He was shivering as much from the thought of having to walk to safety if he had an accident as from the bone-chilling cold. Turning the heater to high, Ben hoped that it wouldn't make him drowsy. A car passed him, travelling in the opposite direction. He caught a momentary glimpse of a familiar looking man bundled up in heavy clothing and leaning forward to see better through the translucent white fluff that seemed to be trying to smother the vehicle and its occupant. It was the first car that had come along for quite some time. Ben felt a kind of comradeship with the other "Braver of Blizzards."

Being on the road for seven straight hours had provided the opportunity for doing a lot of thinking. Ben glanced out the window and saw the snowflakes coming dead at him from a point just overhead. He knew this was an illusion. The man who had just passed him going in the opposite direction also perceived the snowflakes as coming in a head-on attack. "It's the same with starlight," thought Ben as he unsuccessfully tried to suppress a yawn. He let his mind drift to the non-major Astronomy course that he had been teaching for the past 13 years. "Aberration of starlight, what is it?" he would ask while writing the term on the blackboard in the sparsely filled classroom. By this point in the lecture, most of the small number of students present had either fallen hopelessly asleep or were engrossed in the daily student newspaper. Surprisingly, one student raised her hand. "What's your sign?" He hesitated. "My sign?" "You know; your astrological sign. I bet it's Pisces. You've got kind of fishy eyes." He thought, as he straightened his glasses self-consciously, "It was a response, anyway." Ben called on one of his old faithfuls who always sat in the front row, bright-eyed and his calculator ready. "Aberration of starlight is a spectrum shift that gives the appearance that the Earth is intercepting the light rays from stars direct on." The boy gave the correct answer, as he always did. Ben respected his intelligence and dedication, but was also intimidated by it. He saw a younger version of himself, full of the promise of greatness. "Who or what had broken that promise," he wondered.

"Aberration of snowflakes," murmured Ben while chuckling to himself. It was getting cozy with the warmth of the car and a fascinating subject: the stars, planets, galaxies--these were his world. Pleasant nostalgia spread through his mind: inquisitive youth going out on warm summer nights when the sky was hot with multitudes of stars sprinkled across the icy depths of black space, wondering about the meaning of it all. Or the excitement of bringing his own children out to view the tantalizing pinpoints, trying to explain that they were actually burning maelstroms of nuclear explosions producing light and warmth that took millions of years to reach the Earth. Yes, it had always been nice to gaze dreamily at the stars. In fact, he could see them now, from right inside his nice, warm car. There they were, tracing their nightly paths across the sky. But something was wrong. . . . "They're falling! The stars are falling--what the hell?" Ben yelled as he jerked himself awake. He cracked the window and lowered the heat, realizing that it was time to look for a place to spend the night. He needed to get off the road, but voluntarily and in one piece. Having lost the map at the beginning of his journey, he didn't know how far the next town would be, but he knew that as the Milkyway is littered with stars, so are state highways with small towns and motels.

Now wide awake, Ben steered out of another skid as the road began to rise sharply. The blizzard had seemed to let up, and he hoped to be able to spot a town or the flashing neon of a motel from the crown of the hill. Although he did see the faint star-like twinkle of streetlights, he failed to see what blocked the road until it was too late. Bright lights nailed his eyes. Temporarily blinded, he swerved off the road and stopped abruptly as the car came up hard against something. Once again, Ben was seeing stars, but only until everything faded into blackness.

*"There's a girl in there about to give birth."
He paused. "She's only fifteen."*

The blackness painfully gave way to an eerie, flashing yellow light. As he wiped blood from his forehead, three figures silhouetted by the flood of light approached the car. Ben couldn't tell who or what they were; they looked like . . . zombies! A disfigured visage suddenly appeared in the window, causing him to jump, but he saw it was only the very human face of an old man.

"You all right?" asked the old man as he helped Ben out of the car.

"Uh. . . yes, just a bump on the head. What's happened here?"

"Couple of kids stuck in a snowdrift, blockin' the road. The rest of us just got here a few minutes ago. Guess you didn't see us parked there. Lucky you went off the side of the road." The combination of headlights reflecting off the snow gave the scene a heaven-like iridescence that made it difficult to see. The old man, dressed in a collage of sweatshirts and jackets, his grizzled gray beard sparkling with tiny ice particles, stood in front of the other two "zombies." One zombie was a bear of a man, well over six feet tall and thick-set--but not from winter clothing. The other was a high school-aged boy dressed for a party, not a snowy roadside gathering.

Ben's car was snowbound in a large drift where he had run off the road. There was another snowbound vehicle in the middle of the narrow highway; in it, a masculine figure leaned over the front seat, his attention fixed on something in the rear. The yellow flashing light came from a semi tractor-trailer immediately behind it. An old beat-up truck was pulled off to one side. After it, a sleek Corvette sat idle. Ben also noticed that it had stopped snowing.

"You're not a doctor by any chance, are ya?" asked the old man.

"No, why? Is someone hurt?"

"Worse," he answered; the lines in his face seemed to get longer and deeper. "There's a girl in there about to give birth." He paused. "She's only fifteen." Ben shook his head. He didn't know what the world was coming to. The big man announced that he was going to radio for help. He remembered seeing the famous golden arches. "And where there's the golden arches," he said, smiling grimly, "there's bound to be life." Ben and the others went to the car caught in the clutches of the snowdrift. As they walked, he saw that the stars were out, but it was impossible to determine if they added any light to the oppressive gloom.

The car blocking the road contained a very young-looking girl covered by a blanket lying on the rear seat. A slightly older-looking young man with beads of perspiration standing on his neck knelt in the front seat while holding her hand reassuringly.

"This is the girl and her brother," the old man offered. Ben thought it was a poor excuse for an introduction.

"Is he a doctor?" asked the brother with such pleading and desperation in his voice that Ben momentarily regretted that he had studied the universe instead of the art of healing. He started to explain that he was a professor of astrophysics, but the anxious young man interrupted.

"We've got to do something! It's starting!" As if to offer proof of her brother's statement, the girl's body tensed under the blanket and a small cry of pain escaped her lips. The trucker returned through the heavy snow only to report that though there was a doctor in Pequad, the one four-wheel drive vehicle they had was out rescuing townspeople snowbound north of Pequad.

The old man said, "We can wait for the snowplow, should be along soon."

"Yes, but the baby may come sooner," Ben replied. They all knew it was a bad situation. At fifteen, the girl's bones would not even have had time to mature. It looked like one of them would have to deliver, but who? He had seen all three of his own children born, but to do a delivery himself? Ben spoke to the trucker. "Could your truck make it to town if we move the car out of the way?" He knew he was doing something unusual: he was taking charge. But then the whole situation was unusual . . . or was it?

The trucker proceeded to calculate out loud the required distance and speed with the semi's weight and maximum acceleration that would be needed to build up enough momentum to plow through any average size drift. Ben was surprised to hear such sophisticated mathematics coming from a truck driver, a class of humans that he placed only slightly above the Neanderthal. "I'll need at least a half-mile clear of large drifts," he concluded.

"Okay. We'll have to dig the kid's car out and push it off to the side of the road. We'll put the girl in your truck and get her to the doctor. Everyone who has a shovel, get it. Young man, you run ahead and check the road for approximately a half-mile." Ben hadn't expected anyone to object to his plan since they all seemed eager to help the girl, but the party-dressed youth had other intentions.

"Go to hell, man. I'll freeze to death. I'm going back to my car and wait for someone to get us out of this goddamned place." Ben was shocked at the kid's lack of compassion, but then he saw the dilated pupils and running nose that might have been due to more than just the cold and dark. The trucker intervened, speaking in a soft, low voice. When it was evident that he was getting nowhere, he slapped the youth. The boy's face flushed a brighter red from humiliation and anger than from the blow or the cold. He hesitated, but at last trotted off, the darkness engulfing him and the road. The bear of a man shook his shaggy head as he turned to get his shovel. "I hated to do that. The boy needs some encouragement and understanding to help him, not slaps in the jaw. He probably gets plenty of that at home.

They were making considerable progress on the destruction of the drift. Even the former young rebel helped after returning to announce that the road was in favorable conditions for a mile ahead. The girl's brother was frantically scooping snow with his bare hands; the old man wheezed and puffed with every shovelful, but kept on; the trucker used his massive arms to dig and lift out hunks of snow three times as large as anyone else's. It was almost cleared away when they were interrupted by the girl's scream.

Ben climbed into the rear of the car. He knew he would have to do it. He tried to calm her, acting confident as if he were using a telescope to discover a nova. His heart simultaneously warmed and chilled when she manged to

smile with the same innocent trust that had led her into her present predicament. However, her brother didn't share that same trust.

"Wait a minute! Do you know what the hell you're doing?" he shouted, whirling Ben around so they faced each other. The others quickly came to the rescue, holding down the doubting Thomas.

"Does it make any difference?" whispered the big burly man. "What other choice is there?"

The old man said, "But this sure is the God-blessedest place to be givin' birth."

The trucker brought his first aid kit; the old man provided another blanket; and the party-dressed youth fetched Ben's suitcase containing towels, clean and white. They wanted him to perform a successful delivery. Ben had never been very religious, and he knew it was one hell of a time to start, but he needed all the help he could get. It was too late. Without warning, the girl's birth canal erupted into a fountain of blood. Her brother screamed and had to be held down again. Ben could see the baby trying to come out, but the path was somehow blocked.

"Dammit," he cried inside his skull. The baby's white head suddenly appeared. Ben gently took hold... there was a pulse! Then the baby was in his hands, slippery with blood and mucous, but alive. The others cheered; Ben cursed. The blood was gushing--something was damaged inside. Her brother went berserk.

"Goddamnit, help her!"

"I'm trying," Ben yelled as he stuffed towels in to try to stop the bleeding. When the towels were red, Ben felt his throat constrict until he thought he would choke to death.

"Do something, you asshole!"

"What? Tell me what!"

"She's bleeding to death, you mother -----!"

"I know it!"

"Goddamnit, she's dying! Goddamn the world! God--"

"I know, I know, I know!"

Ben sat slumped down in his car seat. He was not dead or even asleep, but just waiting, as they all were, for the snowplow to come and free them so they could continue their journeys down the lonely winter road. His whole being was numb. The doctor had said that he had done all he could have, not knowing anything about abnormal fetal positions or uterine damage. At least the baby had lived. But he still felt partially responsible--living in a society, hell, the whole damn universe, where this kind of thing happened. He thought, "The irony of it: dying to bring forth life." It was the strongest conviction he had felt in years.

Beyond the windshield were the stars he loved so much, had spent years studying, trying to learn all of their secrets... but always missing something. They were twinkling, as if to mock him. "Scintillation," Ben recited by heart, "caused by the turbulence of the atmosphere." He scanned the sky, but to his astonishment he couldn't pick out a single constellation. The others were sitting listlessly as well, snowbound travellers waiting to be set free. They were all visible in the intervals of the semi's flashing yellow lights. He didn't know any of their names, but he would never forget them. "Ah..." There was Orion with his mighty sword raised--to strike another blow?

Here was the old man in his truck, both of them run down, but still plugging away. The trucker with a higher education in his past who had left it for the road, would be headed for a west coast terminal. The driver of the Corvette, the boy not dressed for winter, would make it to his party. He was rebellious, maybe hooked on drugs for any number of valid reasons, but he too had joined in. The brother, who would pay a bitter visit to the morgue that night, knelt in the front seat, his attention fixed on something in the rear. Finally, Ben himself: feeling . . . what? Disillusionment? Failure? They were only words covering his feelings. He would be headed for Arizona.

"No." It took him only a moment to decide that he was going home. His restlessness had been abruptly quenched. Ben needed to be with Mary and his children. He would drive all night. He wouldn't be able to sleep anyway, not until he cried into her shoulder, she rocking him like a little boy who has cut his hands.

The flashing light of the snowplow came down over the same hill that Ben had come down what seemed to him like days before. The plow stopped, its driver jumping out to assess the best way to clear the road of snowbound vehicles. Ben started his car and turned the heater to high. "Dammit," he said as he looked out the windshield, for once again, it had begun to snow.

