

## BIG SNOW

Dear Helen,

How are you getting on in the snow? We've been having a few days of "real winter," haven't we? I realize it's laughable to anyone east of Vancouver for us to be making such a big deal about it, but it's a rare event in our otherwise mild climate, and a little exciting. Were you snowed in? We were – for a day.

When the roads were finally cleared, I made the trip into Sidney for supplies – food, mainly, and candles. Traffic in Sidney was frantic. Everyone, it seemed, was sharing the same survivalist mentality I was.

So there I was, standing with my cart in a lineup at Thrifty Foods, third from the #5 till two days after the big snow. The place was bumper-to-bumper with carts along the aisles and at the tills. I had to pee but that wouldn't be happening any time soon because my line was a slow one. It would be a while before I got out of there.

An old guy, in the number one position ahead of me, was asking the cashier too many questions about the flyer. He thought

beets and cat food were on sale. It was taking the cashier a while to convince him otherwise. Then he started helping her pack, and she was having to unpack because he put too many cans in one bag and wouldn't be able to lift it. Then he went on about the snow, giving her a weather report. "Two feet of the blasted stuff, and more coming! Going to be -4 tonight. Windchill of -11. Arctic outflow from the north. Ferries cancelled. Oh, we're in for it!" He seemed delighted, but I thought, "Will he never be done?"

The couple ahead of me would be having sausages for supper, I decided, also a tub of margarine, orange juice, and a bag of frozen French fries. Their groceries were already on the conveyer belt awaiting take-off. I always look at what groceries people buy. It's what you do while waiting in line. It's a form of clairvoyance. How long will the couple live on this diet, you wonder? He had a stoop; she had a bald spot at the crown of her head and her face was flushed. I put them in their late sixties. They were each about twenty pounds overweight. I gave them five more good years before the slide began.

I wasn't doing so well that day either, what with my impulse purchase of stew meat, even if it was organic. I'd hidden it under a bag of spinach, three oranges, and a bag of almonds. I thought if I was lucky only the cashier would see the meat. Is there such a thing as a confidentiality code with cashiers, like there is with doctors, lawyers, and priests?

I'd been thinking that stew would be a good thing to have on a cold winter's night. But how many times of eating red meat does it take to reduce a person's longevity? I wondered if eating spinach would cancel out that number. Or almonds. Panicked, I decided that this would be my last purchase of red meat ever. I

would never eat it again. This move might be good for a couple of extra years.

I looked around. A woman waiting with her cart in the lineup across from me at the #6 till was applying lip liner and then lipstick, free standing, without a mirror. She was taking a long, careful time to do this. She had on red suede boots but was otherwise dressed in black. She looked chic. She caught my eye, left her line, and came towards me.

It was Julie-Ann. We'd been in the same spin class twenty years ago. Back then she hurled herself through a floor-length window one night because of some problem with her second husband and so missed a month of classes. But this day in Thrifty's she was smiling. Her lipstick was perfect. She wanted to ask me about writing instructors.

"I went to Heidi a few times, but she's stopped teaching," she said. "You know her? No? Well, I'm desperate. I really need to find a new instructor. I have so much to say. I need to get it down before it's too late."

Julie-Ann's line moved forward and she hurried back. The couple with the sausages was finally at the till. It wouldn't be long before they'd be frying them up, I thought, chugging down artery-clogging grease. It wouldn't be long before I'd get to leave with my life-shortening meat and find a bathroom. There were now five carts in my line.

I turned to the skinny young guy behind me to say something cheerful, like "Moving forward at last!" but he was working his phone. I noticed his cart contained nothing but fruit, vegetables, a sack of rice, and a large bag of split peas from the bulk bins. Another sixty years for him, I thought.