



Dear N.J., I just moved here and it took me 12 hours to get home in the snow

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I loved winter, and I loved New Jersey.

On Thursday afternoon, I watched the snowfall outside my office window in Iselin. I didn't get snow at all where I grew up. I couldn't even remember this kind of beauty in Missouri, where I had moved from a few months prior. Who wanted to stay in the Midwest?

The whiteout was mesmerizing.

My boss told me I could leave early if I wanted and finish work at home. But what was the rush? I was only about 25 miles south of my apartment, in West Orange. My Subaru had more than a quarter tank of gas. My phone had at least a half charge.

But it would be pretty to drive through snowflakes in the daylight. I pulled out of my parking spot a little before 3 p.m.

The following are my notes from the next 12 hours. All times are approximate.

The first hour

I pulled onto the Garden State Parkway, headed north. So far so good.

I checked my passenger-side mirror. I swore. I had forgotten to wipe it off, and inches of snow were caked on.

I lowered the window, loosened my seatbelt and, while the car rolled forward, reached toward the mirror. No dice. I picked up a glove and slapped it at the mirror. This did not work.

I found a small ice scraper in my door, which gave me just enough reach.

That was an adventure, I thought.

The second hour

To my right, I saw a sedan stuck in the shoulder. A woman pumped the gas pedal and jerked her steering wheel left and right, but the wheels only kicked up snow.

I drove past her. My soul withered. "If I see somebody else in trouble," I thought, "I will to help them."

God heard me.

Traffic was slowing to a near standstill, so a few miles past a toll I exited the Parkway to try my luck on side streets. Almost immediately, a woman in front of me lost traction and her car jerked in a half-circle, as dozens of us lined up behind her.

I jumped out of my car and ran up to her window.

"I will help you!" I said.

I was not helpful. Pushing a stuck car while wearing dress shoes in a snow storm is as helpful as bringing an accordion to war.

The woman's car slid slightly to the right, leaving just enough room to pass. Somebody honked at me. I abandoned her.

The fourth hour

My phone was almost dead, which meant my GPS was about to go. My car's cigarette lighter had never worked, so there was no way to charge it.

I did not know how to get home on side streets. I jumped back onto a highway I knew.

On the entrance ramp to the 280 West, stopped cars were scattered across lanes, facing every direction. Hundreds, if not thousands of us lined up behind them.

Enough drivers slowly fled the line that I found my way to the front. I weaved through the vehicles, some of which looked abandoned, and quickly found myself the only driver on the road, rolling over fresh snow.

The end is in sight, I thought.

I curved to the left. Up ahead was a sea of brake lights.

The seventh hour

I put the car in park. I couldn't remember the last time we had moved, and I had work to do. I opened my door, waved at an SUV I cut off earlier, and pulled my laptop from the trunk.

With the driver's seat pushed back, I was able to balance my laptop on the armrest and open up Excel.

Every few minutes I glanced out my window. There was a Homeland Security car somewhere in the fast lane, marked as “Federal Protective Service Police.” I didn’t know what that was. But I figured those cops could still hand out tickets for running pivot tables on the highway.

The eighth hour

Police sirens are loud.

They are even louder when they come from a stationary vehicle a few feet to your right.

The New Jersey State Trooper blaring his siren hadn’t noticed my laptop. But when he merged onto the 280, he had noticed that thousands of people were blocking his ability to move forward. This did not please him.

“Move to your left,” he shouted through a speaker.

“C’mon! To your left!”

He repeated this for at least half-hour. We stared forward, like lost cows.

The ninth hour

I needed to go to the bathroom.

I did not have any bottles to relieve myself. I did have some Tupperware, but they were square containers, which presented a different set of problems.

I took mental inventory of what was in my car. I had blankets. An emergency radio. Part of a rabbit Halloween costume. An unassembled IKEA chair.

It felt like the temperature outside was dropping. The chair could be used to make a fire. Would IKEA allow me to return a chair I had set on fire? Maybe the rabbit costume was flammable.

The tenth hour

The gas warning light turned on.

I had only allowed my tank to get this low once before. I didn’t know how long I had.

I forced my way into an exit lane. A man ahead of me in slacks and a dress shirt got out of his car and surveyed the line. Time passed. The man abandoned the line. Others followed.

My phone was at 1 percent. I couldn't risk using more power to check the traffic.

I decided to leave the exit line.

Suddenly, there were people walking all around me on the highway, carrying gas cans.

I was saved. I rolled down my window.

Is there enough gas for me? I asked a man filling up his SUV.

No, he said.

The eleventh hour

I stayed in the exit lane. Gas evaporated. My bladder expanded.

The phone was likely dead.

I inched off the highway and into West Orange. Cops were stationed at intersections. It was approaching 2 a.m., and there was gridlock in every direction, down every street, in every parking lot.

I just needed to find an alley I could park in. I needed sleep. I was dizzy. My contacts were likely passed their expiration date.

And then, up ahead: A street I recognized.

I gunned the engine to 5 miles per hour. Traffic parted. Lights turned green.

I drove past abandoned minivans and sedans and plowed my way around the corner and up a hill and over a pile of snow and past my apartment and into a covered garage.

I had left work at 2:55 p.m., and turned off my car for the last time at 2:45 a.m on Friday.

A year ago, before I moved to the East Coast, I had a job in Missouri that was 31 miles from my home. Every day, it took me 29 minutes to get there.

I owe the Midwest an apology.