

Surviving Canadian Winter and the New Chevrolet

Mon pays ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'hiver.

My country is not a country, it's the winter – Gilles Vigneault

January 1959: Edmonton, Alberta

Their new Chevrolet had been their symbol of hope. It represented what they'd strived for in the years since they left the rubble of post-war England. The car accident that bone-freezing day in January, ripped the scab off the past, and reminded Margaret how impermanent life could be.

Shafts of wintry sunlight streamed through the window, dust motes dancing in the stillness of the room. Margaret lay on the bed, a blanket pulled up over her head.

'Here's a cup of tea, Luv. Try to drink it.' George slipped it onto the bedside table. He sighed, tiptoeing out into the living-room to dismantle the Christmas tree, ornament by ornament, branch by branch. Looking in at their three small children, he stood in suspended animation. Bitter relief flooded his veins. *They're so quiet, so very quiet...but they're intact. They're alive.* He shivered.

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The young couple had begun to live out their dreams – dreams of flying down the highway together in their shiny American car, its flashes blazing. Borne along by rock 'n' roll and the wide-open plains of Canada and the United States, the endless horizon and the blue Rockies rising in front of them, they packed their tent and sleeping bags on the roof. In the first years in Canada, the family had thrived. Margaret had found a job and they made English friends—as immigrants do—a way to cobble together the new and the old, a way to find belonging and get on their feet.

A car had meant freedom; it meant good-bye to rain-soaked England, to war and penny-pinching rations. They discussed all the pros and cons of the new Chevrolet late into the night, George wavering between tension and excitement. Hire-purchase, small luxuries and a new-found ease buoyed them along.

Then came the sting: the debt, the relentless interest and the costs of setting up a life and raising children in a new country – all with no family backup and little experience of North American ways. They pulled themselves together once again and worked off the price of the car, while Margaret created the comfortable home she had longed for during her disrupted youth. Since arriving in Canada, the couple had overcome the fatigue and stress brought by constant change. The expense of the Chevrolet had been harder than expected.

Now in a stab of fate, their driveway lay vacant. That day, the events Margaret met, lay upon her like a tombstone. Unable to cry, unable to move, unable to do anything but slide in and out of her dreams—dreams of the frozen North of Canada and her children—slipping out of her outstretched arms, dissolving into the swirling snow. The nightmarish vision bore down upon her.

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When trickles of condensation froze on interior walls or when the inner and outer windows frosted over—trapping the air pocket in between—Margaret's children played at making frost stars, at melting viewing holes on the windowpanes with their warm fingers, or at blowing their moist breath across its skin of ice. The snap of arctic air, the surreal moonlit glow across the vast sheets of frozen snow, or the blizzard-driven snowdrifts— all of these stood in stark contrast to the cocooned nest where they lived out the short days and long nights of endless winter.

For Margaret the crushing realisation dawned: she had chosen this over the posting to Singapore. They had been flung into this icy outcrop, far from family and all they had known before.

On milder days, when the thermometer hovered around zero, or when the sharp wind from the north dropped, the clack of hockey sticks, the ‘pok’ of the puck, the swishing and scraping of ice skaters echoed through the neighbourhood streets, or from backyard ice rinks. The frigid air carried echos far afield—shrieks of excitement and howls of pain, as children rattled on their sleds down the icy slipways their fathers had created.

Margaret, like all the other mothers, ran the gauntlet between inside play and outside play. She raced up and down the basement stairs sorting out squabbles in the playroom, or helping her children peel off woollen hats, mittens, scarves, snowsuits and boots, each time they wanted to come in or go out—leaving large puddles of melted ice and snow in the entrance or the mudroom.

At times like these, Margaret’s niggling doubts surfaced. Mild shock stopped her in her tracks. Her children had become Canadians, their English accent erased and their passions subverted. She watched them float out of reach, as they gained a passion for ice-skating, ice-hockey, popcorn and hotdogs, and the all-important weekly television broadcast, ‘Hockey Night in Canada.’ Without a backward glance, they embraced Canadian life, building snowmen, engaging in snowball fights, or making snow angel body-prints, as they traversed the snow-blanketed field between their home and school.

The glamour of this new life diverted Margaret at first – a round of dinners, balls and sporting events which she attended with her handsome, uniformed husband. After the trauma of her earlier life, she found comfort in these new routines, in stability. It was a time when she allowed herself a few of the luxuries previously denied, and for the children, a magical Christmas with mounds of presents, tangerine oranges, chocolate coins and real snow.

And they did have the car, the shiny new Chevrolet.

Her sense of unease persisted, nevertheless. She couldn’t get used to what she viewed as excess; long-held habits of frugality and discipline hung before her like a boom gate.

This waking premonition was fulfilled one fateful January day.

2nd January, 1959: Edmonton, Alberta

The impact exploded against the side of the Chevrolet like a massive wrecking ball. When Margaret opened her eyes, she looked to her right — a wall of white metal blocked her view. Her head was spinning. *Is that snow? No...it's ice...no...oh God no... it's the truck...the removal truck...the one coming at us from the intersection...*

Time dragged.

What's this on my face? Slowly, raising her hand, she touched her cheek to discover reddish liquid – stuck to her fingers. The flesh was rough and frayed. *Blood?*

‘Darling, darling, are you awake? Are you alright? Can you move?’ George touched her shoulder.

‘Are you guys OK?’ Voices came from outside the car.

‘The children! The children!’ Margaret’s voice scratched at the frozen air and she blinked, blinded and rigid in the glare of the shattered windscreen. The months and years of struggle, of loving care, of doing without—their brief period of ease—flashed through her mind and turned sour, their innocence dashed. In an instant, the hard-earned Chevy was nothing more than a relic, a sacrifice to their new gods.

‘There’s three of them. Children.’ Emergency personnel hammered and tugged on the doors—pushing against the window frames. A rush of icy air ushered in large hands—hands that palpated small throats, chests, wrists—hands followed by adult faces.

‘Three live ones.’

Tilted upwards on the back seat, the children whimpered and shivered. Their pink fingers pressed against the steamed-up windows, melting the ice-sheen until the ambulance officers slid them out from the small pockets they had been sealed into. Their mother leaned unsteadily

against her husband—both of them mute—while other drivers wrapped the children in jackets and scarves and carried their little bodies to the warmth of neighbouring cars.

The ice-cold shock delivered in the intersection, unearthed Margaret's deep-seated anxieties. Down in the recesses of her mind, she had buried the Blitz and the transience, the fragility of life.

Now, in a shard of time, a wall rose up; a barricade to keep her children, her beloved family, her tiny world, safe from this cold new land.

