

Ramey D'Arcy
Kitty's Book of the Dead

Chapter 1 — The Ice storm

It began in Quebec. A freezing drizzle grew a glistening cocoon of ice on trees, power lines and roads. Transportation slowed to a crawl then stopped altogether. For nearly 80 hours a freezing rain poured down on Quebec and New Brunswick before moving into Nova Scotia and New England. It began on Monday January 5th 1998. Power lines sagged then fell from the weight of the growing ice. By Thursday whole trees had been stripped of their limbs from the weight of ice and hundreds of high tension power line towers, towers that brought electricity from the Canadian Arctic to eastern North America, had fallen. It was a disaster for Quebec. Farmers estimated that 80% of the Sugar Bush Maple trees had been destroyed. It might take 80 years for maple sugar production to return to normal they said. By Friday January 9th, the end of the storm, newspapers in Quebec reported that 28 people had died from hyperthermia alone and another 945 were injured.

The storm didn't reach the northern coast of Nova Scotia until mid-day on Friday. Kitty was prepared. In this part of Nova Scotia winter storms could leave you isolated for days and on occasion, weeks. She had driven the ten miles to town and bought enough food to last one, maybe two weeks. Lots of canned goods, soups, bread and cold cuts should the power go out, which was likely since it was an ice storm coming and Quebec had been devastated. She also bought a couple of gallons of spring water, normally an ostentatious extravagance she thought, but whenever the power goes out the pump in the well doesn't work. Smart thinking she thought.

Within an hour of the storm starting Kitty was growing anxious. This was to be a "long duration event," according to the weatherman. Already there was a visible sheen on the road and Vern, a neighbor right up the road, had gently spun his truck into the ditch. It would remain there until after the storm. She had heard the cracking of small branches breaking from the growing ice in the tree just outside the window where she sat. This was not going to be fun she thought, not like a blizzard.

Kitty was thrifty, like many her age growing up in the Depression of the 1930's, she learned to stretch her dollars. Her thermostat was set at 10 degrees Celsius, about 50 Fahrenheit, as low as it would go. It wasn't as cold as it sounded, she told herself, the pipes wouldn't freeze. Most days she didn't spend much time in the house anyway so why heat it; there were too many things to do in the outside world and if she was home there was always some excuse to cook which warmed the house nicely. She had an electric blanket on her bed upstairs and a manual oil stove for extra heat on the landing. It would do in a pinch if the power went out for days. She hadn't had to use the oil stove in earnest since she put in central heating a decade ago and got rid of the old wood burner in the kitchen. She kept the oil stove filled so that she could provide heat if her children or any of her friends from the States showed up and complained of cold during the night. That old wood burner might have come in handy during the ice storm she thought but then again she'd have to go fetch wood from

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the wood shed. Electricity is a mixed blessing she laughed to herself as the lights flickered for the first time.

At noon the National News had aired a report about people dying in Quebec of hyperthermia. Just to be sure Kitty went into the "cold" room just off her "living room" and opened a draw in an ornately carved wooden chest. The reassuring scent of moth balls filled her nostrils. She breathed deeply before bending down to pull out two old but fluffy wool sweaters. She was already wearing her red long johns, a heavy wool plaid shirt and a light sweater but if the power was going to go out for an extended time she'd get cold. Her mother always said, "If you're cold put on another sweater," so she wanted to be prepared.

When she pushed the draw back in she felt the first twinge of pain, angina. She recognized the pain immediately and pushed the drawer back in with her knee as she straightened up inhaling deeply. When you first get an angina attack it takes your breath away she had told her doctor who just shook his head. She steadied herself for a moment and tried to control her breathing. She had learned that it was easy to hyperventilate yourself into unconsciousness if you let it. She took a mental inventory; she had one nitro patch on already but hadn't taken a nitro pill yet today. The pills were everywhere – on the nightstand, in the up-stairs bathroom, more in the downstairs bathroom and another bottle next to her chair in the living room. This one called for a whole pill, maybe two, under her tongue.

As the lights flickered again Kitty was still standing by the door to the cold room fighting the angina spasms and right next to the thermostat. I should warm this place up so the pipes won't freeze if the power is out for a long time she thought to herself. She turned the thermostat up to an unprecedented 68, no make that 75 Fahrenheit. When Canada went metric the house stayed English. There was a faded English to Metric conversion chart scotch taped to the wall next to the thermostat. Seventy-five is hot, twenty four is not she laughed to herself. She felt the rumble of the furnace kicking in and had to restrain her thoughts of spending hard earned money on heating oil. If the power went out she'd be cold soon enough and saving lots of money.

Kitty struggled to her chair in the living room, sat down and placed a couple of nitroglycerine tablets under her tongue. For "good luck" she popped two aspirin in her mouth and took a swig of tea that had been cooling on the table. Waiting for the angina to subside was always stressful. It was not something you could ignore. Although she had gotten pretty good at putting up with the pains of old age, angina was frightening. She could picture the arteries and capillaries of her heart struggling for blood and dying for the lack of it. She knew it was only a matter of time before ... well, before it would kill her.

The angina subsided a little but didn't go away; might be the aspirin she thought. Just then the lights went out. Kitty sat there for a moment in astonishment, but just as the implications of this development began to penetrate her consciousness the lights came back on but rather than feeling relief it raised her anxiety level. Angina attacks always reminded her that she was mortal and that nearing 80 years old she was "more mortal than others." She giggled quietly to herself remembering the line from George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, "All animals are equal but some are more equal than others."

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On good days, days relatively free of pain and worry, Kitty felt she was at peace with the world and ready to ... what ever it is that you do when you die. Go to heaven? That would be nice but she saw no empirical evidence that heaven or hell existed. Kitty never felt a personal need for religion and her constant curiosity prohibited blind faith in anything or anyone. Of course, almost everyone went to church and the sermons were interesting, perhaps even inspiring from a humanistic point of view but the main point of a rural church was building and maintaining the community. Kitty had been so adamant and vocal about that position she had been voted a lifetime member of the United Churchwomen of Canada, a position usually associated with loudly devout Christians, which Kitty most certainly was not. Kitty would proclaim to anyone within earshot that she was an atheist at worst and an agnostic at best. Life was an adventures and death would just have to be looked upon as one more big adventure. That was the only thing about death that made her content and willing to go into that good night without regret. That was on a good day.

This was not a good day. Angina attacks always caused Kitty to anxiously search her soul for answers that did not require blind faith. So far there were none and the blank wall that the end of life presented was frightening even if she knew it was inevitable.

It began to grow dark. It did that this time of year Kitty reminded herself. She preferred the light. Another branch broke on the tree outside and an overwhelming sense of doom overcame her. It was not panic exactly but, rather, the sudden realization that she might not live through the night. The angina had not receded as it should have by now and Kitty came to the surprising conclusion that she must be having a heart attack. It was so unexpected. "Well, that's one hell of a how-do-you-do," she exclaimed to no one in the room. Is this the time I should press the button, she wondered, have I fallen and I can't get up? Harrumph, she could still amuse herself. Well no, let's think about it, she thought, those poor boys might kill themselves trying to rescue me and I'm not that bad yet.

Just the same she picked up the telephone handset and listened for the dial tone. Its presence was reassuring. If the power goes out the phones might too she thought, I should let someone know that I'm having a heart attack. I'll explain the weather conditions and perhaps someone smarter than me will decide what I should do she thought.

"Hello James," Kitty said. She always called her son James rather than Jimmy as everyone else did. She thought it sounded more professional. James always thought it was odd that his mother insisted on being that formal with him.

"What's up Mom," he asked?

"Well, you've heard about the great ice storm we're having up here in Canada!" she exclaimed more than asked.

"Yes," was the reply.

"Well it began here about noon today. The roads are so slick there is already a car in the ditch across the street."

There was a pregnant pause.

"And ...," Jimmy said.

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"And," Kitty began slowly, "I'm having a heart attack."

"Well," Jimmy said suppressing his emotion, "I think you should stop talking to me, hang up and press your button. Would you prefer I call the RCMP?"

"No, no," kitty said, "It would be far too dangerous. I'd hate to have those cute boys kill themselves trying to rescue me. They would try you know."

"I'm sure they would," Jimmy said, "That's their job and it's your job to stick around."

"Tell ya what," Kitty said, "as soon as a sander comes by I'll call the RCMP. Is that a fair compromise?"

"Who are you trying to bargain with," Jimmy asked?

"Do you think I'm trying to make a Faustian bargain," she laughed?

"Only if I'm the devil," Jimmy replied. "I can't judge your situation, Mom," he continued, "but I'd press the button and let the medics decide if it was worth it. Hell they'll probably send a sander with the ambulance."

"No," Kitty said, "I don't want you to call the RCMP now. It's just too dangerous. I did want someone to know my situation in case this is it." "I don't want to stink up the house," she laughed. Kitty was amazed that she could actually laugh in the face of death ... but what else could you do?

"Have you called Barb and Vince," Jimmy asked?

For some reason Kitty had not even thought of calling them. She had a complicated relationship with Barb and Vince which had begun almost as soon as Kitty had moved to Nova Scotia thirty years before as a widow with two children in tow.

The deed to the farm said, "100 acres, more or less." Being a native New Yorker, "more or less" was not the kind of precision Kitty was used to so she hired a surveyor to mark the irregular boundaries of her property. It was then that she discovered that Vince had accidentally built his house on her property. Not a house exactly but rather just the cement basement with a tarpaper covered slanted roof for shelter and a wood stove for heat. Not the best environment to raise two small children Kitty had thought so she gave them a half acre of land and loaned him enough to finish the house.

"No, Barb would make Vince kill himself trying to get me to the hospital," she said, "I thought it was better to call you."

"Thanks," Jimmy replied, "you called me because I can't do anything about your situation besides calling the RCMP myself."

"Well, there is that," Kitty replied.

"All right," Jimmy said, "I won't call the RCMP if you promise to call Barb. If I don't hear from Barb or you in the next half hour I'm calling the RCMP. OK?"

"OK, I'll call her," Kitty agreed, "If you don't mind I'd like to call you periodically just to keep the line open."

"Of course," Jimmy replied.

They hung up and Jimmy called the RCMP in Pictou. A very young

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sounding officer answered the phone and immediately apologized that he was alone at the station and couldn't leave on any calls. Jimmy asked if anyone could go check on his mother up in Poplar Hill? Not until tomorrow at the earliest was the reply. And what if an ambulance was needed? The ambulance was stuck in Halifax, with all the highways shut down due to the ice storm which you no doubt have heard about. I guess Mom was right Jimmy thought.

Kitty called Barb and explained her situation, omitting the "heart attack" part and admitting only to severe Angina. Barb, of course, offered to send Vince right over as soon as he cleared the fallen trees from their lane but Kitty persuaded her not to let Vince out of the house until the roads were clear. Barb agreed to call Jimmy and calm him down and to keep up contact throughout the weekend.

Kitty had been on the phone for almost an hour by now and the Angina had not subsided. She found herself breathing harder than she had been and wondered if it was the result of the fear she felt and could rationalize or as a result of her decaying heart. She was feeling hot and sweaty too, another sign of a heart attack she told herself. No, she remembered, being hot and sweaty was the result of an extra sweater and a thermostat being set at 75. Better change that she thought but when she tried to lift herself from the chair she realized that she didn't have the strength. Oh dear, she thought, this is a heart attack.

She managed to reach the thermostat with the rubber tip of her cane and moved it in some direction she hoped down but the exertion took everything she had and she sat back in her chair exhausted, her heart racing and the pain throbbing with every heartbeat. She took two more aspirin and placed another nitro tablet under her tongue. She drained the remaining cold and bitter tea in her mug.

The phone rang, it was Jimmy. "Hi Mom," he said, "I called the RCMP in Pictou and asked about road conditions. It's all iced up and they don't think anything is going to be able to move for a day or so. Do you think you can hold out for the weekend? Do you have enough food?" He knew the answer to that question. Kitty was a canned goods packrat. During the Cuban missile crisis she carefully packed three months supply of food and water in the basement of their Connecticut home in anticipation of nuclear almost-annihilation. It took years to eat the stock of canned soup and even then when Kitty abruptly packed up and left for Nova Scotia in the summer of 1968 they had to throw out hundreds of cans whose expiration date had passed.

"I'll be fine," Kitty said trying not to show in her voice the pain that tore through her chest and shoulder. "I have plenty of canned soups and a nice loaf of crusty bread," she added almost as an after thought. She could hear Jimmy laugh at the other end of the phone line.

"I've never worried about you starving to death in Poplar Hill," he said.

There was a pause, then Kitty said apologetically, "I'm not afraid of dying of malnutrition either. I'm more afraid of the power going out, it could get very cold."

Both felt the weight of the unspoken elephant that had just entered the conversation.

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During the long pause Kitty could hear her labored breathing amplified by the telephone receiver. She decided to acknowledge the elephant and keep the conversation from becoming maudlin.

"Well," she said finally and with as much energy as she could muster, "If I kick the bucket tonight, it's indeed been a pleasure knowing you."

Jimmy laughed. He knew there wasn't anything he could do about his mother's situation but, mercifully, the thought of her imminent death was something very abstract at the moment. It was a shame that it would happen sooner or later and he knew there would come a time where he would cry his heart out ... but this wasn't it. His mother was right there on the phone, a living breathing sentient human being. He could talk to her and say ... what?

"I love you Mom," he said finally, "Stay warm."

"I love you too Jimmy," she said, "Call me in the morning. If the ice storm doesn't bring the phone lines down I'll answer. OK? Call Barb otherwise."

There was a long pause and Kitty felt she had to end the call politely.

"So long," She said as upbeat as she could muster and without waiting for Jimmy to say anything back that might prolong the conversation that had grown very awkward, she hung up.

Almost before she had put the phone back in its cradle it rang. It was Barb.

"I hope you were talking to your doctor or the RCMP for the last hour," Barb said.

"James actually," Kitty said, "We had a great chat."

"Does Jimmy know you're having a heart attack," Barb asked getting right to the point?

"Well," said Kitty starting off slowly, "I don't really know if I'm having a heart attack or not. It could be a combination of angina and the pip." She knew better of course but she didn't want to worry Barb.

"It's a heart attack Kit," said Barb with authority, "I called Dr. McKenzie and described the symptoms. He says you're having a heart attack, a classic heart attack and you really need to get to hospital."

"Oh OK. I didn't want to worry anyone," she said weakly, "Besides I don't think the ambulance is running tonight. They couldn't make it up Scotch Hill."

"Humph," Barb said, "The good news is that if the heart attack hasn't killed you yet it may not but every hour you're not in hospital the worse it's going to get. Dr. McKenzie told me to tell you to take aspirin."

Kitty interrupted, "I've been taking aspirin all afternoon and it's helped a bit, so have the nitro pills but I can't get out of my seat."

"I'm calling Vern," Barb insisted.

"No don't call Vern, his truck's already in the ditch across the street. I'll be fine," Kitty said.

"I'm calling him anyway," said Barb.

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"OK," said Kitty weakly as she hung up the phone. She hadn't thought of calling her neighbors either.

Kitty's relationships with her neighbors were complex. On the one hand they were rural neighbors and as such had to look out for each other. On the other hand Kitty wasn't a local, she wasn't a working farmer and she had money. Or so everyone thought.

Everyone in the neighborhood treated Kitty with the kind of respect due the "Lord of the Manner" and if they invited her to an intimate event or even "lunch" they always gave her the seat of honor. Kitty got the impression that everyone had a deal up their sleeve and wanted her to participate and she often did in a small way. Kitty never quite understood why they thought of her that way but she enjoyed the attention, it was a far cry from New York society. The only "locals" she considered herself to truly be on intimate terms with were Barb and Vince. In fact it was Vince who had negotiated most of the deals for Kitty.

Vern, for example, hayed about 40 acres of her land in exchange for milk, cheese and bales of hay to bank her house with in the winter. Vern also plowed out Kitty's driveway whenever it needed it. Vern had a dour Scotsman's disposition and to Kitty, left the impression that he felt he had gotten the worst of the deal. He hadn't and Vince often had to quietly reminded Vern of the good deal he had whenever Vern balked at performing an agreed upon duty or parting with a pound of cheese.

Kitty wasn't sure how many bales of hay or pounds of cheese it would "cost" her if Vern came down to look in on her and she wasn't sure if Vern's attention would aggravate or help her condition.

That thought was put on hold as another spasm of pain exploded from her chest and radiated down her left arm and out through her finger tips. It registered as extremely painful but she was becoming numb to it. Shock she said to herself, I must be going into shock she thought like a deer after it's been shot. Oh happy days she mumbled to herself.

An hour passed, then another. Kitty realized that the pain had indeed subsided but that she had lost all her strength. The angina was still there but the sharp stabbing pains had given way to a generalized ache all over her upper body. She could put up with that she told herself as she fell asleep exhausted.

It was the cold that woke her up. The lights were out. It took a few moments for Kitty to wake. Her sleep had not been very deep or particularly satisfying and she still felt exhausted as she became conscious of her situation. The power had gone out and with it the furnace. It was pitch black outside.

Power outages were not unknown in rural Canada and Kitty was as prepared as anyone. She kept a hoard of candles in the kitchen and in the chest of draws upstairs as well as a flashlight by her bed and another one on the floor next to her chair. That was smart she thought to herself as she fumbled in the dark looking for it.

The filament in the tiny bulb gave only the barest orange glow. It was enough for Kitty to see her breath. She laughed to herself, the batteries in the flashlight had to be 10 years old but they worked when they had to she thought. She had replacement batteries in the draw in the table next to her

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chair; they were at least five years old she thought. She would reluctantly replace the almost dead batteries in her flashlight once she got a candle lit. Well I got my money's worth out of them she thought as she poked around the draw for matches.

Kitty's house was filled with antiques inherited from her parents. The Mercury mirrored wall sconces and the sterling silver candle sticks dated from the 1820's and were meant for use rather than decoration so Kitty had placed them where they could be used during a power failure. There had been enough of those over the years so that each of the candle holders held a half burned candle. The candlestick on the table next to her chair had been used more than most so the wax had overflowed and dripped down to almost cover the tarnished sterling silver of the candlestick.

It took Kitty a great deal of effort to find a book of matches and light the candle. The pain in her chest reminded her that her heart was dying and she was completely winded by the exertion. One thing at a time, she told herself. The candle was lit so she could see well enough to replace the batteries in the flashlight. She leaned back in her chair and managed to replace the batteries without too much fuss. This time when she turned the flashlight on it projected a brilliant white beam across the room. She aimed it at the old mechanical clock she kept on top of the television. It was 4:45 AM. In an hour and a half there would be light, Vern would already be up milking his cows and would come by to get his truck out of the ditch in a couple of hours she thought to herself. If Barb got in touch with him he might poke his head in to see if there was a corpse.

She laughed at that last thought. She could picture Vern, a big stocky man's man, creeping quietly into her kitchen expecting to find her stiff on the kitchen floor. She remembered the time when she had accidentally pressed her "lifeline" button when she didn't have her hearing aid in her ear, a couple of fresh faced RCMP cadets were sent to investigate and they fully expecting to find her dead. Instead they were shocked to discover her not only alive but naked in the bathtub.

Maybe she should call Vern to assure him that she was indeed alive. She remembered the ice storm as she picked up the telephone receiver. To Kitty's surprise she heard a dial tone. As she was about to dial Vern's phone number she heard a pounding, Thud, Thud, Thud on her back door. "Hello Missy," roared the voice. It was Vern crashing through the door.

"Hello yourself," she said, "Barb got a hold of you I see."

"Oh yes Missy," he said, "she said you were feeling poorly and that I should check on you. Are you all right? It's still icing out, must be an inch or three all over everything; probably lost most of me orchard. The roads are bad enough and me trucks in the ditch so I can't take you no place but I see you have plenty of food. That's good. I brought you some milk, Missy. I'll put it right here. You shouldn't open the refrigerator when the power is out ya know. The lights should be back on in a bit. It's cold in here. It's a pity you sold off that beautiful wood stove. How much did you sell it for Missy? It's cold in here would you like your quilt?"

Vern took the quilt that was lying on the sofa and covered her with it. Kitty was shivering and for a moment the quilt made her feel even colder.

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Both of them could see their breath in the feeble glow of the candle. Vern stopped for a moment and stood up straight.

"I think we have a problem Missy," he said looking around, "Your pipes could freeze."

Kitty knew Vern well enough to know he meant that Kitty could freeze to death but he didn't want to say it. She had noticed that he had said "we have a problem." She smiled, Vern would normally have said you have a problem and for – whatever small amount of money he needed that day – he would fix it. It was the "law of the rural neighbor" at play she told herself. There comes a point where commerce ends and survival begins. Kitty realized that she and Vern were at that point, Kitty's survival might very well depend on what Vern was able to do for her.

Vern knew that Kitty had stepped in when he was away and driven his wife 40 miles to hospital when she'd had an attack of Gaul stones. Vern also remembered his father dying of a heart attack in the middle of a blizzard when he was young. He owed her. More to the point, Vern was thinking, Missy was important. She knew people; she had money. She had intervened with the Coop board of directors when he was trying to get his new milking machine. She's helped the McClouds get a new chicken coop and paid to fix up that tractor old man MacIlinary was selling. Actually Vince fixed up the tractor but the parts cost over \$3000 and Miss Kitty put up the money. She let Vern pay her back over time. It was a big tractor that everyone in Poplar Hill used it to cut and bale hay.

"Missy," he said, "The roads are closed."

"I know," said Kitty, "I don't want you to kill yourself trying to get me to hospital."

"I wasn't planning on that Missy, my trucks in the ditch with a foot of ice on it. I was thinking of putting the old sled on the back of the tractor and hauling you down to my house. It's warm. Betsy's already cooking breakfast and the teapot's hot," said Vern.

Kitty was resisting the urge to tell Vern that she'd be all right when the power came back on. Within a second or two she heard the rumble of the furnace firing up.

"Well there you go Missy," Vern said straightening up again. He was back to business. "The heat should be coming back up and the sander is probably up to the top of Scotch hill by now. I guess I can get back to feeding the cows," he said.

"Good bye," Vern said interrupting Kitty before she could speak, "I'll call on you later." Vern turned and opened the back door. He was halfway out in an instant.

As Kitty tried to speak a blast of dry icy air came rolling into the room like a breaking ocean wave and slapped her in the face. It made her gasp involuntarily and shudder under the quilt. "OK Goodbye," she said weakly as the stabbing pain of angina returned and Vern pulled the door shut tight.

I guess our problem has gone away she said to herself as she blew out the candle.

Several hours passed as Kitty tried to sleep in the recliner. It was very

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uncomfortable. If she lay back her angina left her panting for breath. If she sat up she could breathe but she couldn't sleep. By noon Kitty was thirsty and a bit hungry. She'd not had lunch or dinner the day before and the last liquid she'd had was a drops of acidic tea she had squeezed from the teabag in her cup. She also hadn't checked her blood sugar level or given herself any insulin in over 12 hours. Who knows what a heart attack does to blood glucose levels she wondered to herself. I must get moving she thought.

But moving was easier said than done. As soon as she sat upright and tried to get out of her chair the stabbing pain in her chest sent her flying back like an electric shock. "Oh," she exclaimed out loud! She was out of breath from the exertion. "This will never due," she exclaimed between gasps for air.

As she sat back in her chair trying to catch her breath, Kitty was thinking, well, the heart attack hasn't killed me yet and I haven't frozen to death I could die of dehydration I suppose. Something's going to kill me she thought but I don't think I'm ready yet, is anyone ever ready?

She got mad at herself for becoming a maudlin. Win or lose she wasn't going to just sit there if she could help it. She's walked 20 miles through the Adirondack Mountains in high heels and survived, she'd gotten herself out of Nazi Germany when it counted and she'd raised three kids all by herself. She could get to the kitchen and feed herself if she had to crawl on the floor.

It took her well over an hour to get to the kitchen but it wasn't as hard as she thought it might be. It was just a matter of not exerting herself to much and then resting between each baby step. First she sat up, then she pull the chair sitting at the far end of the table closer with her cane. She edged herself onto the chair and took a rest. The pain in her chest almost overwhelmed her but she clenched her jaw and fought it. She repeated this operation until she was finally sitting at her kitchen table.

The phone began to ring. Kitty turned and realized that she couldn't get back to her chair in time to answer it. There was nothing she could do but let it ring. I'm going to give Jimmy and Barb heart attacks, she thought, but I can eat or I can talk on the phone, right now I'm going to eat.

The bags of food she had bought in town the day before were still on her kitchen table. She had forgotten all about them. It's a good thing I didn't buy anything perishable she thought, but that was the point. She'd been through storms before and not just in Nova Scotia. She bought a half dozen cans of soup that were still tasty cold, a loaf of French bread that she could nibble with butter, a jug of Gater-Aid and two bottles of fizzy water.

Kitty had read someplace that old folks, and she assured herself that she was an old folk now, always had electrolyte imbalances so she always had Gater-Aid in the house. Gater-Aid was a very strange liquid she thought. There were times when it tasted sweet and there were times when it tasted unbearably salty. Kitty had long since convinced herself that it tasted sweet when her electrolytes were "out of kilter." Today it tasted sweet so she took a long guzzle and smacked her lips. "Ah," she exclaimed, "as good as tea."

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The power went out again just as Kitty was pulling cans out of her shopping bag. "Nuts," she exclaimed! Her kitchen was not as well organized as the universe around her chair; it was far more spread out. There was a small silver candelabrum that held three candles standing on her kitchen table but the matches, an old box of wooden strike-anywhere matches, were on the shelf above the sink. There was still plenty of light to see in the gloom of the mid winter afternoon but within an hour it would be too dark to easily navigate back to her chair. Kitty had some choices to make ... if the power didn't come back on.

I guess I'd better eat quickly she thought. She was grateful for the easy open cans of soup. In the old days opening cans required a serious manual dexterity and a strength that had long since left her hands. Kitty was not big on saying grace but she liked the formality of a meal even when she was alone and she laughed at the thought of formally entertaining ... herself. Who else would appreciate it she smiled. Food should be placed on plates and soup in bowls and while a paper towel can serve as a napkin when possible the proper utensils should be used like the sterling silver flatware she kept in an old pickle jar on the table. The paper towels were over the sink and without thinking she stood up to pull a sheet off the roll. A dull throb in her chest reminded her of her situation but she was on her feet, perhaps a bit unstable but on her feet nevertheless.

She took down the roll of paper towels and the box of matches and threw them on the table. She thought carefully about what else she might do while she was standing up. Moving was painful but standing as she was, was exhausting. She realized that she was panting again from the exertion and thought she had better sit before she passed out. She just caught herself in time as she wheeled about and sat down with a discernable "thud." For a moment she wondered if she had broken the chair when she fell into it but it held and she breathed a sigh which only gave her momentary relief. She was out of breath again.

Adrenalin! Adrenalin kept Kitty's heart pumping fast, faster, faster still. She could tell her blood pressure was very high from the headache she had and the pain in her chest, shoulder and arm was told her that her heart attack wasn't over yet. There was a bottle of aspirin and nitro pills on the kitchen table. The pain in her left arm made her hand shake but she forced herself to calm down and concentrate. Rotate the cap to the left until the arrows line up and pop the top. Two aspirins with a gulp of Gatorade, it still tasted sweet, and two nitroglycerine tablets under her tongue. Her nitro patches were on the kitchen table too and Kitty realized that she had not changed her patch in almost 2 days. She wasn't sure what would happen if she got an overdose of nitroglycerine, two pills plus a nitro patch but it probably wouldn't kill her she thought.

Kitty sat at her kitchen table trying to calm herself down. Most of the time she was pretty good at it and eventually, after what seemed to be hours she could feel the pain subsiding in her chest and her blood pressure coming back down to more or less normal. That's better she thought as she watched her pulse throb on the back of her hands. God, old ladies hands she thought.

The last light of the receding day cast a gray pall over the room. There were no shadows just the grey of approaching night. Kitty's breathing had

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gotten almost back to normal and she made an effort to keep her movements to a minimum, just like the Hindu priest or Buddhist monks in prayer she thought. This is one hell of a path to nirvana she laughed to herself. I suppose I might as well make my last supper. You're full of galls humor she thought to herself; only Jimmy would sit here laughing, Barb would be horrified.

She found the strike-anywhere matches, lit one and lit the candelabra on the kitchen table. It's got to be a couple of years she thought, I should have dusted the wax dripping off the candles. Satisfied, she set her table from the pickle jar that held her grandmothers college silverware. Her grandmother was in the fifth class at Vassar College and had been sent to school with a full service suitable for entertaining a dozen as well as a maid fully trained in etiquette. Kitty always liked her grandmother's silverware for the serviceability and beauty of the set over the one her mother had given her as a wedding present which was much heavier and robust. Given the circumstances I wonder what the proper setting should be she thought; Larousse would insist on a full setting even if not all the utensils were used. That settled she placed all the utensils in their proper place and smiled.

The silverware was perfect but the plate in front of her, a stoneware "second" made by a local craftsman, was not. She laughed, nothing will ever be perfect ... and who would know the difference anyway she thought as she pulled an easy open can of Vichyssoise from the supermarket bag at her feet and placed it in the center of the plate. Next she placed the loaf of now day old crusty French bread on the table in front of her. My last meal, I suppose I should say grace she thought. She sat there for a moment staring into the gloom with a blank thought. "Humph," she said at last to herself.

The Vichyssoise never tasted so good and while the silver soup spoon proved difficult to use in the narrow opening of the soup can the stale French bread did a marvelous job soaking up the remaining soup hiding in the corners and crenellations. Kitty, satisfied, sat back in her chair and finished off the rest of her Gatorade which had by now begun to taste salty.

Kitty suddenly realized she had to pee. Curses, she said to herself. She wondered if getting to the bathroom would bring back the heart attack or angina. Sliding her chair across the floor towards the bathroom only got her half way before the chair became stuck in a rip in the linoleum where the old wood stove had been. Kitty pulled herself up and stood leaning on the electric stove. She felt better and took a hesitant step towards the bathroom then a second. By leaning on the stove, a cabinet and finally a shelf she managed to get to the bathroom. Getting back seemed a little easier.

Kitty could hear the telephone ringing in the distance, I wonder who that is she thought, I better answer it. It seemed like a dream. Kitty could hear the insistent ringing of the phone but was unable to do anything about it. The ringing was waking her up. She realized that she was back in her chair in the living room. The last place she remembered being was in the bathroom. The phone rang again. She picked up the receiver and weakly said "hello." She could hear the weakness in her own voice so she cleared her throat and said as forcefully as she could, "Hello!"

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"Hello Kit," said the voice on the phone. It was Barb. "Are you hanging in there," she said?

"I ... I must still be here," Kitty said weakly. "I made myself some dinner."

"That's good," said Barb, "Jimmy called, said you didn't answer your phone yesterday or this morning."

"I was in the Kitchen," said Kitty, "I can't run to the other room right now to pick up the phone. The best I can do right now is crawl around."

Kitty suddenly remembered that she had fallen getting out of the bathroom and had crawled back to her chair. It seemed like a dream but I guess it wasn't she thought.

"What's the weather like outside now," said Kitty?

"Well the freezing rain has stopped but the power is still out. They say it's some main line near Truro that's down – should be up any time, according to the radio," said Barb.

Kitty made a note to find her emergency radio. She had bought fresh batteries for it just in case.

"Call Jimmy for me and tell him 'I'm still alive.'" said Kitty. "Do they know when the roads will be clear," she continued?

"The ambulance is in New Glasgow is the answer to your question," said Barb, "The causeway is still closed but the RCMP said it might be open later this afternoon. You are first on their list."

"I'll be here," said Kitty weakly, "Call Jimmy and tell him not to worry."

"I will," said Barb, "take care of your self, bye for now."

"Bye for now," said Kitty as she dropped the receiver on its cradle.

She was fully awake now, conscious of her surroundings. It was early afternoon, the skies were still grey but lighter than they had been, or so it seemed, it was impossible to tell the time, everything was so grey. Kitty realized that she must have been unconscious for almost 24 hours. The power was still out and she was covered in an unfinished hooked rug. She could see her breath. She was very, very cold, her breathing was very difficult. Still, she was snug as a bug in a rug she was thinking as the world dissolved into white.