

**#163 FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: December 23, 2010**

**A long day's driving into night**

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—If you're going to get knocked around, it goes a bit easier when you can anticipate the blows and then roll with the punches.

That's what I tried to do last Thursday and Friday when I had to drive from Blue Grass to Morgantown, WVa., where I presided over an arbitration hearing.

The shortest route cuts straight through West Virginia's highest mountains over two-lane roads, widened somewhat from the original Native American footpaths. It's a gorgeous three-hour drive, except when snow, ice and darkness turn the rattlesnake curves and the camel humps into a near-death experience.

In good weather, I'd drive it on the morning of the hearing. But the forecasts promised cold and snow and ice and grief, so I planned conservatively, cautiously, prudently and humbly to leave at 2 or 3 p.m. the day before. I junked this reasonable plan when Thursday morning dumped several trillion snowflakes on Blue Grass.

I left at 11:30 a.m. as eight inches milled around, gathering in gangs, summoning reinforcements and threatening decent citizens. Instead of driving my normal northwest course that was a more-or-less straight shot, I would take a longer route that gave me a better chance of getting through.

I would sneak northeast along the lower-elevation valleys of the Alleghenies to Cumberland, Md. Then I would bang west over several 3,000-foot-high ridges on Interstate 68, a winter dragon that routinely burns prideful vehicles sent to slay it.

Traveling through a storm over unpredictably icy roads is a distasteful task. You have to drive slowly, and you have to drive with great intensity. You shouldn't be solving the coming Social Security crisis in these conditions.

But the nice thing is that you're alone, doing something useful that presumably needs to be done while balancing on a knife's edge. It keeps you awake if nothing else.

Driving in these conditions doesn't differ much from navigating the family through the holiday season.

During December's festivities, I crawl through blind curves, trying hard to stay on my side of the line. I creep up and down the grades, many of which should be nothing more than bumps in the road. I try to anticipate random acts of pique from on-coming traffic, and I keep an eye on the rear-view mirror for what's closing fast.

Everyone on this highway is plowing through the same slop, from different directions and with different destinations. All of us try to avoid sliding into a brake-locking skid that ends in a big pile-up or, worse, a ditch of our own making.

Every family has idiosyncrasies, and many have a screw or two loose, though usually not completely out and rolling around like a nut. I'm reluctant to slap the label, "dysfunctional," on so many of us when, in fact, we function at least as well as, say, a neglected-but-running farm truck—that is, some. The basket-case families are another story—sad, sad stories that play out generation after generation.

I'm what's known as an "only child"—a condition for which I probably bear responsibility. But I've kept company over the years with women from families with at least two kids. They were almost always either the oldest or the oldest female. None of the kids in these families were particularly close, though civility reared its welcome head during the holidays.

I never missed not having brothers or sisters. It's also true that I don't know what I may have missed. My daughter is an only child, so she, too, is missing, or not missing, the same. I am a triangle with my parents and so is she with hers—three-point polygons in life's geometry.

These thoughts skittered through my brain as I drove through the snowstorm while singing the buttery bass of "doo wop, doo wah" from the Five Satins' "In the Still of the Nite," recorded originally in the basement of Saint Bernadette Catholic School in New Haven, Conn., in 1956.

I've been led to understand that Fred Parrish, its street-corner composer, told the nuns that it was a song about religious fervor—holding "you" tight; "I'll pray to keep your precious love." Etc.

(The CD helped me stay within my part. I did, however, throw in on a couple of falsettos, which strengthened the overall presentation. I didn't fuss about the fact that my recording was one Satin short of five. With me coming off the bench, we were a handful. On long drives, I also sing lead for The Shirelles.)

As I drove, I didn't think about any "night in May." I thought about my small family triangle.

It may or may not be a jolly season, but it is the time to make sure that the family polygon closes, no matter the length of its individual lines or the number of angles. I figure this doesn't happen on its own.

The Morgantown paper on Friday morning reported more than three dozen crashes. I saw three. Not paying attention to what's important; not anticipating; not rolling with the punches.

Driving home on Friday evening through the mountains was a snap—only five hours in the still of the night.

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