

NO HEAT

This is going to be a short essay; my hands are freezing. We've been without heat for nearly a week now. The low-water emergency cut-off relay on my steam boiler short-circuited, blew out the transformer—and so the green machine with its arteries of pipes and valves lies cold on the cellar floor where a coal bin once sat. The part to fix it, apparently, is currently winging its way from the Land of the Seldom Used Parts. I imagine it as a magical parcel that will reanimate the heart of my machine.

Alas, we exist at the mercy of plumbers. A woman drops her daughter off for religious school at the side of my house; it's 7:30 in the morning, and I hear the mother say, "Are you dressed warmly enough?" I'm nearby, walking Nellie; I think: *No, I'm not.* We without mothers must cry out to plumbers for our warmth!

I've got two electric oil-filled radiators trying, bravely, to put a dent in the chill. When the electric blanket goes on at night, Nellie dives beneath the covers. It must be 80 degrees down there. She doesn't mind.

This cold, stressful experience evokes memories of Hurricane Sandy when my old street, Woodbridge Avenue, lost power for nine days. As I had an electric stove, I couldn't even make a cup of tea. My neighbors, Jean and Bob, possessed a gas stove they could light with a match, and so every morning they brewed me a hot drink for breakfast. Another neighbor was running a loud generator in his garage. I asked him if I could plug in my phone for a minute to recharge it. "No," he replied over the roar of the motor. "I'm using it." I thought: *People will finally reveal who they really are.* The couple who ran the frame store in the Tano Mall had power, and they allowed me to recharge my phone. In exchange, I walked to Dunkin Donuts and brought us all hot coffee and donuts. They were full of wonderful stories about all the oddball stuff people were having framed (a broken mirror, tennis shoes!) I remember driving back home to eat Ritz crackers and peanut butter. (No refrigeration required.) I wore my parka all day long—even slept in it. My days followed the sun. I had no electricity to light a lamp. I slept at sunset, rose at dawn. No electricity meant the gas stations couldn't pump. No one was going anywhere. Truthfully, there was nowhere to go.

This week has felt less dire. I do have power. "Beethoven was coming to grips with his deafness..." explains the WQXR announcer as I write this. And as I watch the slaughter in the Mideast on television, I'm reminded of the pettiness of my own problems; the narrowness of my life. *There is limitless suffering in the world,* I think to myself. *Forget the chill in your fingers. Look at the world. Look at the light. Remember that you're alive to observe the world and to annotate its unexpected beauty.*

Nellie sighs in agreement, as I put on a second sweater.