

Snowy Brighton

In the late 1960's, I was attending college in a city, called Brighton, on the southern coast of England. Brighton was well known for being a destination resort where many English people spent their summer vacations. It was not well known for being a center for academic excellence, which was probably why I was accepted into college there. Enough regarding my failure as a student.

The next best option to college dorms, back in those days, was the YMCA hostel. I spent two years living at the "Y" and I will admit that I thoroughly enjoyed the situation there. I had two main friends at the time, John and Meryck. Meryck was studying Construction Management and John was a parolee out of the English equivalent of Juvenile Hall.

During the January of my second year, the south of England was hit by a freezing winter storm. We were not deluged by rains and floods, which was what most storms delivered to Brighton. Instead, the freezing temperatures blanketed the city in snow. Inches upon inches accumulated over the course of a Friday. By dinner time everybody was hunkered down with only the hardiest and craziest venturing down the road to the pub (that demonstrated how serious the situation was.) While waiting for the evening meal, we watched buses careening past the hostel. None were going forwards perfectly; in fact, most of them were somewhat out of control. They transformed into red double-decker ice skaters gracefully spinning and sliding their way around a wide bend praying that they not hit a solid object before coming to a halt. Once at a standstill, the drivers simply climbed down from their cab, pulled up their coat collars and walked away.

Over the course of dinner, John, Meryck and I heard news reports that Brighton was cut off completely from the rest of England due to snow drifts and it could be days before people could get in or out. The last time that Brighton had been cut off by snow was more than 60 years before that time. There were also reports of approximately 1,500 vehicles being abandoned along the five mile strip of coastal highway that ran from Brighton to the next little coastal community that had the charming name of Saltdean. This was all very interesting, but one last piece of news peaked our interest. Apparently, the temperature was so low that the first few feet of the sea had frozen along the Brighton beaches (they were not sandy as that word suggests - they were rocky and stoney).

Frozen sea was an unusual phenomenon on any stretch of the English coast, especially the south coast.

Swallowing a mouthful of pie, Meryck said " I don't care how rare such an event may be, there is no way that I am going out there."

John immediately chastised him “Meryck, you are such a stick-in-the-mud. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. I say we take a quick look and can stop for a pint on the way back. Are you up for it Barry?”

I stared across at Meryck “Sure. It can’t be any colder than what it was when we camped up in North Wales in a snow blizzard, last year. Meryck, you can buy beers for the next week, if you stay here.”

John agreed “So are you coming?”

Meryck had a habit of looking cornered when we pushed him to step outside his comfort zone because he liked his creature comforts “Sure. I just don’t want you two reminding me of the time I didn’t join one of your little adventure.”

We left the dining room jibing back and forth. We met up in the lobby having wrapped ourselves in just about all the warm clothing that each of us possessed and departed the warmth of the “Y”. It normally took us about two minutes to reach the promenade, but with the temperature, the accumulation of snow and our absolute amazement at how everything looked, it took us ten minutes. We made it down the concrete steps that were lost under a foot of snow and on to the rocky beach, which was flat and white under the moonlit clouds that hung low in the dark night sky. We ambled slowly down towards the water that we could see clearly out further. But near the actual water’s edge, it was difficult to differentiate where it was snow on rocks rather than snow on frozen seawater. We knew we were on frozen seawater when we heard cracking noises: we retreated away from the sea quickly. It was rather fascinating to see small waves surging into the leading edge of the snow that then melted back before the wave disappeared under the sheet of ice.

We soon needed to move to revive our freezing toes. As soon as we regained the promenade, we stopped. John asked “How often is the promenade so empty of people and traffic?”

Meryck said brightly “Never! Let’s go and check it out.” He turned away from the “Y” and the pub, and strode off through drifts of light snow that had been turned a light orange color by the street lights, which lined the promenade.

I looked at John “Well it appears that he who did not want to come initially has had a change of heart.”

John gave one of his impish smiles “We both knew that he would enjoy an adventure, if we pushed him.”

We walked along what we thought was the pavement to see how many cars had been dumped as the storm hit. There was quite an assortment, some were stuck in drifts, some had had small fender benders and others seemed to be just stopped for no apparent reason.

By about 9:00 we had been out for about two hours and the storm had moved onto other parts. The heavy blanket of clouds had thinned and broken into individual clouds that allowed the half moon to play hide and seek over the white sparkling vista that Brighton had become. We reached the edge of town where the coastal road started a gradual climb over the first hill on its way towards the next town, Saltdean. In normal conditions, we could have seen that the three lane road was set back about a hundred and fifty yards from the cliff top without any fence or demarcation. On the other side of the road, we could have also seen a small golf course rising up a slope. But that night, it was an immense expanse of snow and drifts.

I looked around where we stood "This is absolutely unbelievable. Who would ever have thought this could happen?"

John stared out across the snowy expanse "Actually, I am wondering if the news report was believable when they said there were 1,500 cars stuck ahead."

Meryck resorted to his pragmatic side "There is only one way to find out. Come on."

We moved in the direction of Saltdean "One. Two. Three. Four. Five." And on we went.

We could see, by the moonlight, that there were cars all over this vast open area and as to where the actual road lay, we had no more idea than probably most of the cars' drivers. Being inquisitive, we wondered how close any were to the cliff edge. We trudged along the packed car tracks that most cars had followed. It seemed that most people had veered towards the golf course to avoid the cliff edge, especially in that blinding snow storm. It truly was astounding how widely scattered were the vehicles. I lost count at about 900 cars where as the others had lost count earlier. We were so intrigued by the continuous field of abandoned cars and trucks, that we forgot our counts and eventually found ourselves in the next small town, Saltdean, with the clouds thinning beautifully, just before midnight.

The moon and stars appeared pale as clouds drifted slowly in front of them, throwing shadows over us as we meandered through the snow. The cold bit at any exposed skin, but we were bundled and thankfully there was no wind to really chill us. So on we went. After Saltdean, it was not open country side, but older small residential areas where lamp posts defined the road's edges. By their light, we could follow the line of the curbs under the snow. In parts, cars had been abandoned, but they had been pushed to the side of the road, rather than just being dumped wherever they became stuck. Every so often, we could see the cliff tops that ran parallel to us behind a single row of smaller bungalows. When we dropped down into little valleys, due to the temperature differences, a light haze hung low, embracing us temporarily. We could look out into the black waters of the English Channel on which small waves were sometimes visible in the ghostly moonlight.

At about 12:30 in the morning, we reached the section of open country that separated us from the next town, Newhaven. By the looks of the road, the storm had not been as severe in this part. There were no drifts, just acres of fresh virgin snow covering the roads, fields and hedgerows. With each step, our shoes crunched lightly in the snow that lay several inches deep. There were periods when none of us said a word because the harmony of our crunching steps seemed to add a voice that bore witness to our passing. As we walked, I came to realize that vast open expanses of snow, especially in moonlight, manifested a quality that I could only describe as profoundly peaceful: a feeling that surpassed just peaceful.

We reached the outskirts of Newhaven and easily dropped down to the harbor area. As a cross-Channel ferry was docked at the wharf, we wondered if there may be an all-night cafe open near the ferry terminal. We were met by just more white blankets of snow and no option for a nice warm cup of tea. But then we had a really good thought. Surely, the local police station would have some tea brewing. The three of us walked into the little police station that occupied the lower floor of a house, a little before 1:30.

The officer-in-charge looked up surprised from the newspaper that he had been reading "Good Evening or Morning as it is now after midnight. What do you lot want?"

Unabashed, John immediately made his request "Hi. Any chance of a nice cup of tea to warm three students on a chilly night?"

The officer looked shocked "Where have you lot come from?"

John met the officer's stare "Brighton."

"Well, you lot can go back to Brighton, if you want some tea."

We sensed this encounter was not going to make any tea forthcoming. We turned on our heels and departed, grumbling about the hospitality of the British police force.

Our return trip was a little more focused on getting home rather than exploring. Plus, we could follow our tracks through the sections of open country side where drifts had made the snow deeper. It took us about three hours to walk back.

As we wandered back from the promenade to the "Y", Meryck broke the silence that fallen on the group since we returned to Brighton itself. "That was an amazing night! I would never have imagined I would ever do something like that. Thanks for dragging me kicking and screaming out for a quick walk to the beach and back. You two are really bad at estimating how long walks will take!"

John replied "OK. We did take a little deviation but what's a couple of miles, when you are with friends? I thought it was you who had a thermos. You did not bring any tea!"

I awoke from my trudging gait “Tea. Do you think Harold, the “Y”'s night watchman will have a fresh pot ready?”

John was not encouraging “If he does, I don't think I could wait for him to pour three cups.”

Disappointed, I replied “Oh well. Let's just head to bed. This has been really good fun! If it was closer to dawn, I could entertain seeing it, but it is hours away.”

Harold was very surprised to see us come back so late. He simply grumbled and went back to his nook by the stove in the kitchen while we retired to bed. We all slept really well for the rest of the night and the following morning.

It took a few days for the roads to be made passable and for all the vehicles to be rescued. It had been quite a once in a lifetime storm and we had managed to witness its results when it still lay pristine and beautiful. It had landed up being an all night adventure for us and we probably walked almost twenty miles during it.

We all felt a little stiff for a couple of days afterwards, but we all agreed that any aches were the result of a great night out. In fact, we landed up doing the night-time walk from Brighton to Newhaven and back on probably another three or four occasions before the end of the academic year. We could walk the 18 miles in good conditions in about 5 hours. We never thought of stopping for tea anywhere on those subsequent walks.

On that original snowy version of the walk, we agreed with most of the news broadcast that we had heard: the sea was frozen along the shoreline and there were a great number of cars abandoned along the coast road. But we proved their supposition that it would be days before people could come and go was totally wrong - it took us just a few hours to leave town. Indeed, cars, trucks and trains may have been ineffectual, we just needed our feet and our determination.

Now looking back and thinking of the very many miles that my feet have carried me, no matter if it were walking, hiking or running, those introductory 18 milers were just a start. I have been so fortunate to have a good strong pair of legs and feet - not that life is not catching up with me a little now-a-days. But by seeing life and the world on foot, I have seen real life and the real world. I would not have seen more out of the window of a speeding car. I perhaps would have glimpsed some of the detail that was there, but I could not have seen it or understood it. I have found that to speed through life is to pass life by, where as to move through life more slowly is to live life.