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Power Waiting - Wendy Hacking

There are the short ones and then there are the long ones. You never really know when one is going to happen. Of course, there can be signs. Wind, not surprisingly. Wet snow. These things make you anticipate a long one and so you get ready. Wood. Soup. Candles. Books. Batteries.

But sometimes, on a snow-less, cloudless, breeze-less day, a short one happens—The. Power. Goes. Out.

You don't see it first, you hear it. The five-second screech of the wired-in smoke detector. Screeeeech!

'It's off!' he calls. 'I hear it!' she replies. 'Damn', she mutters. Usually it doesn't stay off right away.

Screeeeech! 'It's on!' he calls with misplaced hope. Screeeeech! 'Damn, damn damn, my bread's just about to go into the oven', he exclaims. And waits, hoping, hoping, hoping, as always, that this will be a short one.

Screeeeech! 'It's on!'

If you think this might be a short one, you have your personal lucky charms to make it stay on. She never resets the digital clocks right away. He rushes to flush all the toilets.

When the power goes out late on a winter's afternoon, it's almost always a long one. You know the light from the sun will not linger and the velvet of darkness will wrap the house early, so you light the candles and bring in more wood for the stove. The darkness, relieved in small circles by candlelight, is wonderfully cozy...for one night. (You have a tradition: if the power is off for two nights you open a bottle of good champagne the second night. Just because.)

Before the battery-operated radio is turned on to CBC Two, you hear the silence left by the missing noises of living: the burble of the fish-tank air filter; the swish, swish, swish of the ceiling fan; the cycling hum of the refrigerator.

They say that you're supposed to phone it in when it

happens; that there's no master computer and technician monitoring when it goes out and dispatching repairers to your address. So you find the one phone that doesn't need power to operate and tangle with the power company phone tree.

If you are the first to report it being off, you actually get to talk to a person. That person doesn't know their BC geography very well, because they always say: 'We'll have someone come right over to your address.' It's a lie. But, 'thank you,' you say because you've learned to not bother trying to have a dialogue with someone reading from a script and doing their job. You know the repairers are, at best, a boat-ride away on another Island and are rarely sitting around waiting to respond to your call.

When you navigate the phone tree an hour later, to see if there is a report of estimated repair time, the recorded message says: 'The estimated approximate repair time is 6pm.' It is currently 8pm. Does the message mean the power should have been on two hours ago and they haven't updated the message? Or—oh God!—does it mean 6pm tomorrow night? There is just no way to tell. So you wait. The whole Island waits.

The next day neighbours check on neighbours. 'Need anything?' 'Got any 2%?' 'We brought Evelyn over last night for soup and to sleep on the couch by our fire. She's 95 now, you know.'

As you go about your day, you can almost feel a collective re-ordering of lives geared to the automated telephone tree report: 'The estimated approximate repair time is 6pm.' It's 6pm. The power is still off.

It's 7pm. Screeeeech! 'It's on!' 'I know, I heard it! But it looks kind of brown!'

Screeeeech! 'Dammit'. 'Open the champagne!' ☞

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Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada. Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.
Email: islandtides@islandtides.com. Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>