

## Joyride III

By Keith Forrest



For all our self-proclaimed bravado, shore residents are the least hearty people I have ever met when it comes to Jack Frost's handiwork. All you have to do is whisper the word "snow" and the average Cape May County resident will slip into a full-scale panic that should be reserved for truly dark experiences such as quadruple bypass surgery. With just a few inches of the white stuff in the forecast, all the bread, milk, and eggs in the county are cleaned off grocery store shelves, as if war rationing is set to begin in minutes.

Ask your average next-door neighbor to estimate the amount of snowfall we get each winter and he or she speaks in hyperbole befitting any Hollywood screen writer. My wife and I survived a two-year stint in Erie, Pa. When we moved back, I had forgotten about all the snow panic until one of my old friends decided I needed to be re-indoctrinated. Noting that I hadn't lived here in quite some time, he told me emphatically, "We get a lot of snow here."

Looking bemused and a bit bewildered, I said, "Actually I am quite a snow aficionado. You realize that the shore averages only about 12 inches of snow per year. That's not even one ruler's worth." The look I received was roughly the same as if I told my friend that he had three heads. "Maybe that's how much we got when you lived here," he barked. "Not any more."

Noting the hostility, I was puzzled by several important questions. Why do all the bread, milk, and eggs get swept off of every supermarket shelf with even the rumor of snow? Are they all going to make French toast? How long do they expect to be stranded in their homes? Most of us don't live in log cabins.

Growing up in Cape May, the worst

and frozen tater tots in the interim.

But there is something else puzzling about the snow psychology of the shore. If we're so panicked about a bout with the white stuff,

how come we don't change our driving habits at all during a snow storm?

As soon as snowflakes begin falling, accidents blanket the area. As far I can tell, this isn't the snow's fault. Apparently, every person in south Jersey has purchased an SUV, and they are convinced that their behemoth automobiles can drive at breakneck speed, regardless of weather conditions. Maybe this is the place where our bravado kicks back in.

During my two years in Erie, Pa., I lived in a town that averaged more than 200 inches of snow per year, more than 15

feet. Schools never closed. People didn't panic. There was always plenty of bread, milk, and eggs to go around. During a snow storm, people drove slower. Admittedly, the Erie area's redeeming qualities may have ended there. But they didn't just think they got a lot of snow, they actually did.

So maybe there is an inverse proportion at work. Maybe winter's mayhem is actually generated by the creative reaches of our minds. We may not get much snow, but we're much better story tellers. Unlike the boy that cried wolf, apparently if you say "snow" enough it will pile up on the roads and lawns of our collective unconscious.

I love the fun and unexpected holiday that comes along with a snow day. I missed that when I moved to a true snow belt. I realize slippery conditions, even with a small amount of snow, can be dangerous. But our winters are no Hollywood epics. Most of the time they're more like made-for-television movies. I just wish we were as good at driving in snow as we are at shoveling tall tales about it.

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