

# NOTES FROM A CHICAGO WINTER

*"Well, I learned a lot. You'd be surprised. They're all individual countries"*  
- Ronald Reagan, following his 1982 trip to South America

I've been staying close to home. It's that time of the year. People seem surprised that we have all consciously made a decision to live in a place with such damnable weather. And so we try to leave, especially during that pocket of nothingness, the yawning lull that comes just between the end of a Superbowl that had little to do with us, and the end of a season that may actually cause the Bulls to stretch.

It's February and everyone is traveling but me. It is the irony of my profession that I can only go when the getting is not good. I sit and send others away and I wait for another day, probably a perfectly sunny one, to take off from O'Hare to somewhere. I yearn to join you at the airport, with the thermometer hovering around -2 degrees. But you'll find me in Germany in December, in Grenada in July, and in Madras during the rainy season. It is my lot in life to be off seasonal.

I sit looking out my window at the cars left, motors running, in the parking lot. It's as though we have been suddenly been transformed into some Minnesota fishing village. We've been suffering from the bitter cold, some of us more than others.

My wife, Angela, left town for a few days to inspect a number of spa resorts in Arizona. Angela is a spa person. Her perfect meal consists of a glass of orange juice or an ice water with a twist of lemon. My cover as the local restaurant critic is sometimes shattered by the woman who accompanies me on my rounds ordering only "the house salad".

I try to hold things together while she is gone, a difficult task given my reputation as the third best agent at my firm. I've been working later than usual and dining primarily on bits of Chinese take-out. I thought that paper plates and paper boxes would help me keep the kitchen clean. Angela's trip lasted only four days. What could go wrong?

On Saturday afternoon, about three hours after the close of business, I found out.

I had gone home, and I was lying in bed listening to Kate Campbell sing lilting stories about small towns along the Mississippi Delta. As I listened to the CD, I closed my eyes and pictured a few selected scenes from times I call my childhood. I heard the sounds of crickets at night, a waterfall, and my collie sighing as he rested by the foot of the bed. It was the first chance that I had to rest in several days and, although it was six o'clock on a Saturday night, it felt later because the temperature outside was minus fifteen and dropping. Kate was singing about Tupelo and the waterfall was getting closer. I was very close to falling asleep.

I sat up. I don't exactly know why, except that the waterfall didn't fit in my dreams. I concentrated. The waterfall wasn't on the CD. It wasn't in my memory. It was downstairs. My pipes had burst.

I've always had what I can only describe as reverse paranoia. I don't get nervous about the things that seem to trouble other people. I'll stand in front of groups or cameras and it doesn't really phase me. But I do panic pulling up to the bank teller drive-through, trying desperately to think of something worthwhile to say. So when I walked down the stairs, saw the water pouring through the crack in the wall, and observed the half inch of water covering a good part of the downstairs, I didn't panic. I experienced a sense of calm. And I thought of Angela. Wasn't today the day she was scheduled to get a spa treatment at the Phoenician Resort?

I didn't know who to call so I called the police. They put me on to someone who works for the city who told me that it would take about an hour and a half for someone to come out to try to help me find the valve that shuts off my main water supply. I didn't know what to do. So I turned off the CD.

Then I called Ken. He's one of those friends you can always count on, a private investigator from one of those slough towns in Pennsylvania. The real thing. He came right over, shut the vent and sent me to the store for mops. He helped me clean up, as best we could. He eventually replaced the copper pipe that had burst and had my water back on in 24 hours. And I did very little to help him.

I knew there was a shop class in high school, but none of the kids that I hung around with ever actually took the class. I was always taught that you called in a professional when things broke down. I was about thirty before I realized that a car owner could actually change his own motor oil.