

# On Weather: Snowstorm

written by Guest Contributor | October 16, 2016



## The Unknown

When I arrived at the Bryce Canyon National Park entrance, I tried not to let the ranger's heavy tone dampen my spirits. "Half of the park is closed due to snow."

I had just driven more than two hours, even through the switchbacks of Zion National Park, to get to Bryce Canyon, and it was my only chance. Plus, it was my birthday. Didn't that count for something? The ranger's raised eyebrows and crimped mouth said it all. Still, he handed me a map and showed me how far I could venture into the park.

I decided it must be safe, since they hadn't closed it entirely. I got back in my car and headed as far as possible into the park before working my way out. The first stop was Bryce Point.

When I arrived, I saw another car. Validation! I parked close to the path entrance and followed the signs for the scenic lookout.

I tramped through a few inches of snow and reached the edge of the canyon. Here the path became a peninsula of earth surrounded by openness. It also narrowed. With no guard rails or fences. And a slight decline.

My steps changed to shuffles as the edge of the path crept closer on each side and the snow continued to fall. I started to doubt my decision as I made my unprotected way toward the scenic edge.

It suddenly hit me—no one really knew where I was, except the skeptical ranger. One slip might send me over the cliff. I shook my head to dismiss any intruding negative thoughts as shuffling turned to inching. It wasn't the time for my imagination to get carried away. Best to channel all my energy and focus on the path.

I finally reached the end—a cul-de-sac of solid earth surrounded by cliffs. Firmly planted in the middle of the smaller than preferred area, I raised my head. I wasn't prepared for the expansive canyon that greeted me.

True to its name, the Wall of Windows were formations of eroded rock mimicking arched windows composed of alternating bands of rust, salmon, and burnt sienna colored earth. The snow added shimmering white window treatments. I snapped some pictures hoping to capture the glory of the scene and treated myself to three more minutes of the view. Then I inched up the slope and back to my car with a mixture of relief and pleasure.

Riding high from my first successful stop, I drove to Inspiration Point. As I hiked through a wooded area and thicker snow, I heard a snort off to my right and turned just in time to watch a small herd of elk bound through the trees. I smiled, even as the wind started blowing snowflakes into my eyes. I crunched down the remaining trail to the scenic point. An army of tall skinny spires—hoodoos—ringed with swirling white crowns greeted me, and the wind gusts encircled me.

My last stop was Sunset Point, where I ran into an older couple. The snow was blowing horizontally now, and we laughed at ourselves—half out of embarrassment—at our attempt to see the canyon. Between the wind and snow, I could barely see anything—not even the famous Thor’s Hammer hoodoo. It was time to leave.

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I didn’t notice the elephant until it was sitting on me. It was there again the next morning...and the next.

While not a morning person, I was never someone who needed to hit snooze on the alarm. But in the middle of 2012, it took all the energy I could summon just to get out of bed. It was torture.

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By the time I turned onto the major highway outside the park, just 20 minutes later, the snow was almost a non-issue. Hardly an inch covered the road, and nothing was falling. I regained cell service, so I called my family members for birthday wishes and shared upbeat stories about Bryce and St. George.

I decided to drive a different way back to St. George—the northern route through Dixie National Forest. While a longer drive, the map indicated the road would take me to a major highway sooner than going the other way through Zion, and I wouldn’t have to tempt fate with any snowy switchbacks. I started fantasizing about the evening’s spa treatment.

I turned onto Route 14, which would lead me to Cedar City through Dixie. Here too, hardly any snow was falling or on the ground. There weren't many guardrails either, but that didn't register at first.

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I knew I wasn't happy at work, but I hadn't realized how bad it was until the elephant arrived. Then my dad was diagnosed with bladder cancer.

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It didn't take long for the road to incline. It was gradual, so I didn't notice at first. I did notice the snow. There was more falling and on the ground. Still better than the switchbacks, I decided.

The road's incline became more obvious. Trees grew closer to the side of an increasingly curvy road.

As I drove, I kept thinking it was probably better here than driving through the switchbacks. But doubt started to creep in as the sky darkened and the snow thickened. I passed by a sign completely covered in snow. My stomach clenched.

I checked—no cell service.

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We were waiting for my dad's surgery to be scheduled to see what they'd find. Then my boss slammed me for a decision I made based on an approved policy. No questions. No discussion. No benefit of the doubt. Just accusations.

My level of frustration had reached its limit, and I did something at work I had never done before.

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The snowflakes grew bigger and heavier and flew at my windshield faster and faster. My wipers struggled to keep up. I turned on my defroster to help, but that seemed to make things worse. Clumps of ice formed along the wipers blurring my visibility. I had to stop the car to break off the ice.

As I drove on, I looked around and realized I couldn't tell where the side of the road was. In fact, I couldn't tell what bordered the road, if anything, and if there were places to pull off. Every time the road seemed to go downhill a bit, it would only be a dip and then continue upwards.

Now every muscle was tense. I passed more unreadable signs. The tree canopy seemed to envelop me, and my lights were no match for the snow and darkness.

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I cried.

Because the new leadership didn't care about anyone's opinion but their own. They issued directives without context, support, or substance.

Because they didn't care who the people were beyond their titles. At every biweekly meeting with my boss, I waited for a minimum ten minutes while he checked email, made a call, tidied his desk, fixed his hangnail. No, I shouldn't come back later. I should wait in his office and understand my place.

Life is too short to be miserable. I didn't deserve to be treated that way. No one does. There were too many real things to worry about. Real things that mattered and people who mattered—who deserved my focus, my energy, my time.

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The dangerous reality of my situation started to sink in. How did I get here? And what was I doing? Too many things could easily go wrong. I pushed the thoughts from my head. I needed to ignore my hammering heart. I needed to focus. I needed to drive. And I needed to break more ice off my wipers.

Once in awhile, a truck would drive in the opposite direction. I would try to follow its tracks, but now the snow and wind covered them within seconds. I had less than ten feet of visibility, making every stop to clean my wipers more nerve wracking.

This was definitely not how I wanted to celebrate my 36th birthday. And I

definitely didn't want it to be my last one.

I started an internal debate: keep going or turn around. Maybe I was close to the highway and things would get better. Trucks were on the road, so I was hopeful. At this point, I was driving through white out conditions. Could things really get worse?

The sky was dark. My wipers were becoming useless, and I felt like I was driving into the middle of nowhere.

The road continued to climb higher.

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I had literally and figuratively reached my breaking point. Amongst the tears and frustration, anger sparked and resolution flamed. I sat very still in my office alone and shook my head. I silently growled, "No more."

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My internal debate shifted. I had no idea how long I had been driving, how many miles I had driven, and how many I had left. I didn't know what was waiting for me up ahead, but I knew what I had driven through and going back would take me downhill. I decided to turn around.

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I decided to quit.

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But where? There was no good time or place to turn around. The ten feet of visibility didn't leave much time for oncoming vehicles. And not knowing where the road ended and potential cliffs started didn't leave much space. I slowed the car. Trying to contain the adrenaline rush surging through my body, I made the tightest and most deliberate three point turn of my life.

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I slept well that night and felt more calm inside than I had for months and months. The elephant migrated.

Everything at work seemed easier after that. The disregard, frustrations, and antics were there, but they didn't pierce my skin. I became Teflon.

My dad's surgery went well. A follow up surgery removed any potentially affected tissue. There was hope for a full recovery.

I started to plan my exit.

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I wanted to get out of there. Without thinking, I started to gun it. The car fishtailed. I started to talk out loud, trying to calm myself down.

During a flash of panic, I flattened the gas pedal again, and the car slid all over the road. Through the haze, I saw lights coming toward me. I released the gas pedal and my choke hold on the wheel, desperately searching for my hazards. The truck approached slowly, and I regained control. After we passed each other, I released a huge breath I didn't even know I was holding.

I started slow deep breathing, trying to count to three while breathing in and breathing out. During random bursts of panic, I pumped the gas, and then mentally coached myself on patience and focus. I also kept my vise grip on the wheel and my hazards on.

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I made the decision to quit in the summer of 2012, but planned to give my month's notice on February 1, 2013. Early on, family, friends, and key people at work knew, including the person who worked for me. We had a great relationship.

Most people were supportive of my decision, but not all. I had some surprises. One acquaintance called my action "stupid."

I thought living with an elephant was stupid.

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In an odd moment of clarity, I realized I was grateful to be alone in the car. I wouldn't have wanted to put someone else in this situation. Then I realized I wouldn't have allowed myself to put someone else in this situation. How had I done this to myself?

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February arrived. I was unexpectedly nervous. I met with the dean first, who was surprised at my announcement. What I thought would be a short meeting turned into more than an hour-long talk. The dean asked about my reasoning and my plans. I was candid but restrained. Professional. More than fair.

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As I made my way through the forest, the trees released their hold on the sky, and the snow decreased. At exactly 4:02 pm, I emerged from Dixie National Forest and turned onto the highway that would take me back to St. George the way I had driven that morning. Just as it was before, there was little snow on the main road and none falling from the sky. Eventually, my shoulders and hands relaxed, my heartbeat slowed, and I stopped thinking about my breathing, until it dawned on me—I still had to drive through the Zion switchbacks to return to St. George.

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Half an hour later, I met with my boss. He didn't even blink. He also didn't ask any questions. He just said best wishes while he stood behind his desk. I'm sure a hangnail was waiting.

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My hands tingled for the next hour. A bird flew into my windshield, inflicting another flash of panic and causing me to strangle the wheel again.

As I neared the entrance to Zion, I noticed a van up ahead on the side of the road. People emerged with their cameras. How stupid, I thought. What are they

doing? I didn't realize how entirely focused I was on the road ahead of me until I looked slightly to my left. There, lumbering through a snowy field was a herd of bison. I quickly pulled over and stood outside just staring at the beasts for a while.

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March 1 arrived. My last day. My freedom. My leap of faith. I didn't look back.

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I arrived at the switchbacks and took a deep breath—this time from relief. There wasn't much snow, and the roads had been cleared fairly well. Soon I left Zion and returned to a major highway.

My cell service returned, and I called my best friend back on the east coast. I knew he would say the right thing. He wouldn't think I was stupid. Or stubborn. Or crazy. He wouldn't judge me. Or freak out on me.

He would understand that our journey in life is all about the decisions we make. When we face the unknown, sometimes we leap; sometimes we turn around. The important thing is that we make a decision and continue on. He got on the phone, and I said "Hi," in a shaky voice. The second he asked if I was okay, I broke down. Because at that point, I didn't have to decide anything, and I knew I was all right.

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Jennifer L. Blanck is a writer who continues to take leaps of faith, although she's more careful when it comes to snowy weather. Her writing has appeared most recently in



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