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Headline: Snow daze

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By Anne Miller

Staff Writer

ALBANY - I looked pathetic, like a wet, shivering dog trying vainly to swim upstream.

My aching back strained to lift another shovelful of snow from beneath my two-wheel-drive tires and the odd clumps of whiteness that sneaked under my jeans and inside my shirt melted into an uncomfortable wetness.

I shuddered at the cold and wet, at every moment that passed and made me later for work, at the effort I had already expended only to have a car that was not yet halfway close to drivable.

I wanted to lie down in the middle of Madison Avenue beside my plowed-in car and let the snow swallow me.

When I moved from south Texas to upstate New York in 2002, I thought I had it all figured out. New job, great new apartment, back in my rightful place north of the Mason-Dixon line.

But growing up in Maryland, a half inch of snow was enough to shutter schools and panic the populace. I weathered a few larger storms of a few inches at a time, I learned to drive in ice and snow in high school, and I figured I was set.

That feeling lasted about four months. Then December blew in.

Within three months of coming to the Capital Region, I had seen more snow than I had witnessed in my previous 27 years combined.

I had the wrong clothes. The wrong shoes. None of the right equipment. My shopping list seemed eternal: boots, ski pants, shovel, ice scraper, long underwear, all things I had never owned and knew little about procuring. I was so clueless I didn't know what questions to ask, and so new to the area I had no one to ask questions of, except cynical co-workers who chuckled when I bemoaned my discomfort.

A secret club

Being a newcomer to winter north of New York City is like entering a secret club, and part of the initiation is figuring out how to survive. No one tells you what to expect, in a practical sense.

The daily details that seem so commonplace to longtime residents, however, threaten to overwhelm newcomers.

"How do I prepare for a winter storm?" asked Aracelis Ortiz, a native of Puerto Rico, who moved from south Florida to Guilderland in April. "Is that like preparing for a hurricane? Do we receive advanced notice, and we go out and buy all the items we need? And, last but not least, I keep wondering, 'Am I really ready for the cold weather? Do I need more socks? Heavier comforter?'"

At a Jiffy Lube on Central Avenue, first-year medical student Christa Abraham wondered what her car needed. Any extra fluids or flushing? What type of oil should she get?

Abraham grew up on the island of Trinidad and Tobago, and although she lived in Boston before enrolling at Albany Medical College, she considers this her first full-on winter. She did not know, for instance, that windshield-wiper fluid could freeze.

First-timer

Back when I first arrived, I didn't know that my trendy jeans were hopeless in December because there wasn't enough room for long underwear beneath.

Who knew I needed to think to set my alarm a half-hour earlier on snowy weekdays so I would have time to dig out my car before work.

These days, I'm happy to share my hard-learned lessons.

I've thankfully lost weight, so those too-tight jeans aren't a problem now.

Instead of snapping up every warm, cheap, cozy sweater I can find, I save and spend a little more on thinner wools like cashmere or Angora, so I can be warm without feeling like the Michelin Man.

I keep my shovel and my scraper in my car at all times, just in case.

If I can, I leave my car in the parking lot at work and car pool home with a friend who has a four-wheel-drive Jeep and an apartment a few blocks from mine (which leads to another piece of advice: Befriend neighbors with four-wheel drive).

Ortiz was smarter.

"Before moving here, I spoke with a gentleman from Puerto Rico who has lived in Albany for over 10 years," she said. With his help, Aracelis, a professional numbers-cruncher, worked out a budget more than \$1,300 for heat annually, \$1,000 for a new wardrobe.

Wardrobe basics

Yes, the winter wardrobe: Cotton layers are bad, polyester ones are good. Ski pants are not for the mountain only, as I discovered during that first, ill-fated attempt to dig out my car on Madison Avenue.

But don't take my relatively inexperienced word for all this.

Take Jim Snyder's or Christopher Williams'.

Say *auf Wiedersehen* to cotton for the next five months, Snyder advised.

"You start with a base layer silk, wool or synthetic," explained the Valatie resident, who works part time at Steiner's sports store in Glenmont. He leaned against a sales rack of parkas and cast an eye around a store packed with cold-weather gear, from fleecy balaclavas to toasty Gore-Tex boots.

"The purpose is to bring moisture out of the body, so you stay dry," he explained.

Cotton soaks up water and holds on tight not what you want next to the skin in the kind of day where snot freezes (yes, that does happen, as several folks from the Hilltowns and the Adirondacks oh-so-helpfully shared, although, they quickly added, that was as children waiting for the bus).

Williams owns an autobody shop in Delmar. "If you drive in the Northeast, you're going to get rust," he said. Frequent washings help.

And don't follow too closely behind a salt or sand truck, he cautioned. The chunks can scratch, and the molasses (yes, molasses) that keeps the rough stuff sticky also sticks to cars.

Auto fluids

A full tank of wiper fluid is a must, and most places around here use the lower-temperature stuff automatically, he said. Winter wiper blades cost a bit more than the regular kind, but they wrap the entire blade in rubber, with no gaps for ice to sit in and damage the blade or arm.

Make sure your oil can handle the cold too, he advised. The viscous fluid carries a description of, say, 20W50, 20 being the winter weight. That might not suffice, he said. Try 10W50 or 5W50, he suggested.

"Check the anti-freeze mix," he said. "Most of the damage to your engine happens at start-up."

I wish I knew all that as I struggled with my shovel that day on Madison Avenue. My efforts appeared to entertain the folks passing by or standing at the corner bus stop.

Eventually, a man lumbered over from the bus stop. He was about three times my size in height and girth, dressed in worn clothes of doubtful cleanliness.

"Let me help," he said. I could offer no cash, I said. He shrugged.

In about five minutes, my car was ready for takeoff.

Another rule: Look pathetic enough and eventually some paragon of humanity will offer to shovel your snow.

I thanked the stranger profusely and sped to work, only a few moments late.

I attempted to regale my co-workers with the morning's adventure the plowed-in car, the angelic stranger, my general pathetic-ness.

They couldn't have cared less.

Which leads to my final tip: Don't vent to the natives. For when the snows come, find a few newcomers to throw a pity party with.

There are more of them around than you think.