

A Detour for Helen

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The "Goodwin's Lakeview Restaurant" sign was not some spiffy spotlighted expressway billboard with giant painted people smiling down at you and enticing you with huge succulent lobsters and festive cocktails. In fact, not only was the sign not spiffy, it was downright dull—a white, crudely-lettered unmanned sandwich board standing stiffly between the two white gas pumps at Bob's Shell, the only filling station in Old Cedars.

No, this was no eye-catching expressway visual. Most people traveling this heavily-forested and sparsely-populated stretch of Northern Michigan interstate went right on by the generic GAS-FOOD-LODGING exit which led several winding and wooded miles down Rt. 46 to Old Cedars. Most people drove on by the exit, talking over CBs, playing "I Spy" with whining children, spraying crackers with cheese from aerosol cans or listening to tapes.

People who did take the exit either had empty gas tanks or full bladders. Helen Cooper had both. Helen took the exit at 82 mph and screeched to a halt at Rt. 46, frightening a flock of finches into flight and causing a crow to abandon its feast of roadkill.

Helen turned east and left two parallel lines of smoke as her tires spun out towards Old Cedars.

Running low on gas was not typical of Helen. She was a careful planner who nearly always anticipated what might go wrong. In fact, this same ability to foresee problems was what had advanced her so rapidly in her career as an investment counselor in the Detroit firm of H. Alders Development Co. Though Helen's rise from secretary had required long hours and exhaustive work, her uncanny avoidance of snags distinguished her from her colleagues. While others struggled up the ladder of success, it appeared as though Helen merely rode the elevator.

At the top of that elevator, at least the one in the H. Alders Development headquarters, was the office of Neil Alders, son of H., and the reason for Helen's failure to fuel fully before heading north to Traverse City to begin the Harbor Crest project. The previous evening, Neil had proposed marriage, though he made it sound more like a merger or a joint venture.

Helen and Neil had just finished presenting their plan for Harbor

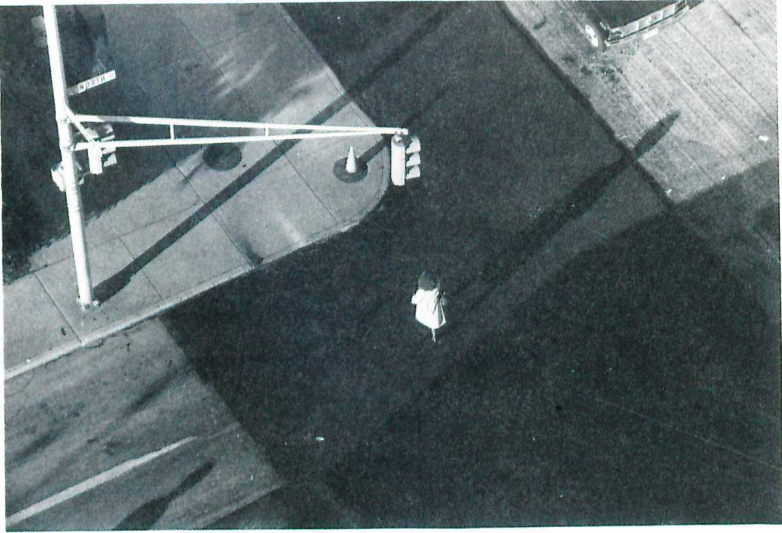
Crest, a multi-million dollar Lake Michigan condo complex complete with a 500-ship marina, wet and dry bars in each unit, and a half-mile stretch of sparkling shoreline along the great sand dunes. After a round of applause for this new pocket-lining project, the 12 stodgy white-topped and wing-tipped board members shuffled out of the posh meeting room leaving Helen and Neil alone. Neil had turned to Helen and without the faintest hint of romantic trappings said, "It's silly of us to continue maintaining separate residences, Helen. I think it's time we consolidated our homes as well as our lives and became an official team. We could do it next week at the Caribbean Conference—turn it into a sort of honeymoon."

Helen was dumbfounded: not because he had asked her, but because she found herself saying she would have to consider his offer. And consider it she did—all through the night with no decision and no sleep. The next morning she had to leave for Traverse City to begin the preliminaries for Harbor Crest. She packed her weekend bags in the trunk, packed the bags under her eyes behind a pair of sunglasses, filled her thermos with freshly brewed coffee, and her stomach with day old Danish.

So, there was Helen Cooper speeding down Rt. 46 with a nearly empty gas tank and a nearly overflowing bladder. Her eyes darted left to right scanning the horizon for the GAS promised by the GAS-FOOD-LODGING sign. The morning's accumulation of caffeine added quick jerky movements to her overall birdlike appearance. Her nicely shaped head was crested by yellow hair shorn short on the sides and permed frizzy on top. Helen's long thin neck seemed to continue through her streamlined body and emerge as long, thin arms and legs. Her angular face and slightly sharp nose were softened by rounded lips and blue eyes with luxurious lashes.

Helen's eyes focused straight ahead as she raced on irritated by this detour for fuel. She had planned to arrive at the Traverse City Inn, relax in her room's Jacuzzi, and then spend the evening working. She had no desire to take in the roadside beauty of Rt. 46. She was on edge from the caffeine and tried to concentrate; she became absorbed by the whirring of the car's engine.

Helen sped down the road caught in the illusion that the sleek gray body of her Datsun 280-Z was a giant vacuum cleaner sucking up the road beneath it. Her peripheral vision caught not individual oaks, birch, outlines of delicate Queen Anne's Lace or feathery goldenrod, but rather blurs of colors which were, like the road, swept up by her car.



After a few miles of gently rolling hills, Helen began to see the gray of her car blending and becoming one with the gray of the pavement. As the car rose, so did Helen. A swift descent down a hill caused her stomach to feel heavy as if she were going down in an elevator. "Shit," she said, "Where the hell is the station?"

She suddenly did not feel in control. She felt as if she were in a giant game of Crack-the-Whip with the road being the undulating whip and she in the car being tossed about on the end. She felt as if circumstances were forcing her, against her will, to go down this road. She felt, for a brief moment, helpless.

Helen emerged from an S-curve and found herself barreling down on a pickup truck with a camper on top. She pulled out to pass, but had to slam on the brakes and jerk back into her lane to avoid the oncoming car. "Shit," she said, "Two other goddam vehicles on this road and they have to meet here."

She tried to pass again, but saw the "No Passing" zone and was forced to follow the pickup. She wondered how many millions of camper-topped trucks roamed the country with trout decals leaping across the windows, folding lawn chairs tied to the back doors, and cute names written on the spare tire cover. Helen noticed "Chuck and Arlene's Sex House" in front of her and was not amused.

When she was at last able to pass, she glared at the portly driver and his wife and was irritated when they both smiled and waved. Helen was glad to see them shrink away to nothing in her rear view mirror.

The motion of the fading couple in the mirror was like a home movie of Helen's life. She remembered another time and another waving couple in her rear view mirror — only she hadn't looked back then.

Helen had grown up in a town not unlike Old Cedars—two bars, two churches, a gas station-convenience store, a Ben Franklin's, an IGA and a two-story cement block building which housed her parent's home upstairs and their restaurant downstairs.

Helen's life in her hometown, "God's Country" as her parents called the north, was her life in the restaurant. Until she was old enough to work in it, she stayed upstairs with her ancient grandmother. Helen listened to the rattle of heavy dishes and pans down below and learned to tell time by what aromas wafted upstairs.

Her father used to jokingly say that the restaurant owned him. Helen never saw the humor in the remark—she took it as fact. Her parents shuffled upstairs every night at 9:00 p.m. and shuffled back down every morning at 6:00 a.m. to start coffee for the regulars who would mosey up to the speckled linoleum-covered counter and drink

from personalized mugs bearing names like Little Eddie, L.J. and Big Mama.

Helen's parents never wanted a big business and they got just what they wanted. What Helen got, as she grew older, was a progressively more intense yearning to see other faces, to read menus that didn't have 'cold slaw' or 'ho-made pie' on them and to see the world beyond the five-mile radius of her house.

On her 16th birthday, having just served the latest customers' burger baskets, Helen stood behind the counter filling catsup bottles and pondering the people. She decided that there were three kinds of people born there: the kind that eked out a living running dingy little businesses, the kind that dreamed of one day leaving, and the kind that got the hell out at the first opportunity. Helen knew her opportunity when it came.

For Helen, freedom came in the form of four wheels. Her grandmother had died and left Helen an old, but little used car. The afternoon of Helen's high school graduation, Helen loaded her three plastic milk crates of belongings into the car, waved back to her parents in the doorway of the restaurant, and drove downstate to begin a new career as a secretary.

Eight years later, Helen reached Bob's Shell in Old Cedars. There was no "Please pull up to the last pump" sign, so she stopped in a cloud of dust on the right of the first two pumps. On her way to the restroom, she shouted to the gawky attendant, who was reading a comic, to fill it up.

Finding the "LADIES" door locked, Helen flew back to the car where the boy was inserting the hose. "The key!" she demanded, "Where is the key?"

The adolescent flushed at this obviously big-city woman with her stylish lavender suit and matching heels mentioning the bathroom. He lowered his head and hurriedly fetched the eight inch piece of wood marked "LADIES" with the two inch key dangling from it.

Helen came out of the restroom shaking her hands to dry them as there were no paper towels. She asked the boy to please clean the bugs off the windshield and got in the car.

The attendant went to the big galvanized pail between the second pump and the sandwich board sign advertising Goodwin's Lakeview Restaurant. As he reached for the squeegee in the bucket of cleaning solution, his pointed butt jarred the sign nearly collapsing it upon himself. It was then that Helen noticed the sign.

As the lank lad returned red-faced to the car and proceeded to make

overlapping swipes across the rear window, Helen read the sign, "Goodwin's Lakeview Restaurant. Daily specials. Good ho-made food. Newly remodeled. Open seven days." She looked across the street where the arrow indicated and saw a sided building. "Yeah, right," thought Helen, "This sign translates: burger baskets and two-day old pie, cement block under siding and can't afford a day off."

Helen watched the boy come around and begin his swipes over the splatted bugs on the windshield. As he reached to the right side of the window, she noticed that the large circles of sweat under his arms almost reached the twin "Bill" patches sewn on the pockets of his blue gas station shirt. Not wanting to look at Bill, she turned her eyes out the driver's window.

Just at that moment, "Chuck and Arlene's Sex House" rolled to a stop on the other side of the pump. Helen remembered the glare she had given them and hoped that they didn't. She fumbled in her purse to avoid eye contact.

Chuck and Arlene were a nicely matched middle-aged pair of pear-shaped people. He slowly emerged from the driver's seat, stopped and stretched, and then ambled over to Arlene's side to help her out. She leaned on her husband of 30 years as she, too, slowly emerged. They both had on khaki colored Bermudas that contained round bellies and left plenty of room at the bottom for their spindly white legs.

Helen looked up as they squeezed between the pumps and waddled by in front of her car. The attendant, who was beginning to get a bit flustered with two customers at once, said, "Be with you in a sec, Mr. Goodwin." Bill began doing double time on the windshield.

"No hurry, Bill," said Chuck Goodwin. "We'll just get us some bait around back. Besides, the little lady there's in a hurry," he added as he put his arm as far around Arlene as it would reach. He gave Helen a quick wink.

"Yeah, up yours sideways," thought Helen. She grabbed her thermos from beside her only to find it drained along with her allotment of patience for the day. Helen made a dramatic gesture of looking at her watch, hoping the boy wasn't too dense to catch the hint. Continuing his previous rhythm of swiping the window and wiping his squeegee, he evidently didn't notice.

Helen searched her map for the fastest way out of Old Cedars. The combination of lack of sleep, too much caffeine, and the all too familiar small town began to close in on her. She was beginning to feel trapped and a little suffocated.

"Will that be it, ma'am?" asked Bill.

"Air!" shrieked Helen, startled out of her drifting thoughts.

"What?" gasped Bill.

"Air. See if the tires need air," explained Helen. "The left rear one might need some." She remembered that tire had a tendency to get soft and she didn't want a flat once she got going.

"It's a little low. Wanna pull over there?" said Bill as he motioned to the right of the station where the compressor was.

As Helen pulled over, Chuck and Arlene came with their bait from behind the station. She could hear their conversation as they stopped to chat with Bill.

"Saw your dad yesterday, Bill," said Chuck. "Was tellin' him how our Jeannie's gettin' good at takin' over the restaurant. Your dad says he's leavin' you in charge a lot now."

"Yeah, well school's almost done and then I'll be in charge more," said Bill trying to untangle the air hose.

"Jeannie says you asked her to the senior prom," said Chuck as he gave a quick wink to Arlene.

"Yeah. Just two weeks away," flushed Bill, his arms pretzled as he tried to untwist the hose.

"Shit," thought Helen. She tapped the steering wheel in frustration at the boy's slowness. She breathed a sigh of relief when he at last straightened out the hose that would, like an umbilical cord, hook to her tire and give it new life. The thought of squeeling her tires out of the town caused the muscles in her foot to tense on the accelerator in anticipation.

Helen looked in her outside mirror and saw Bill coupling hose to valve stem. Chuck started to say something and Helen saw the downward pressure of Bill's hand on the hose shift in unison with his eyes as he looked over at Chuck. At the same instant Helen saw the valve stem bend too far and snap; she heard the whoosh of air escaping from her tire.

Bill was bewildered until he saw Helen's face; then he was terrified. As she leaped out of the car, he tried to stand, but like a dog on a waxed floor, his feet would not cooperate.

"WHAT IN THE HELL HAVE YOU DONE?" shrieked Helen whose face had become hawklike and whose gesticulating hands looked to Bill like claws.

Bill tried to explain, but couldn't get the words past what he felt was his heart about to come out of his throat.

"YOU IDIOT," ranted Helen, spewing spit in punctuation. "CAN'T YOU EVEN FILL A TIRE? YOU GET THAT FIXED BEFORE . . ."

"Now just a minute, young lady," interrupted the heretofore silent Arlene. "You got no right to talk to the boy like that. He didn't mean to do it."

Helen spun around and saw Arlene standing by the Coke machine, chin stuck out, her flabby upper arm echoing the movement of her finger as she shook it at Helen. Helen suddenly felt like a naughty child.

She saw Chuck, arms folded across his chest as if waiting for her reply.

Helen looked at Bill, crimson and almost crying, and remembered how awkward and intimidated she felt at his age when outsiders gave her a hard time. "I'm sorry. I know you didn't mean to do it," she said to Bill. Then to Arlene, "It's just that I'm in such a hurry."

"Out-of-towners always are," said Arlene. "You probably didn't have time to eat lunch either.

"No, I was going to get something when I got to Traverse City," said Helen.

Arlene stuck out her hand. "Well, you aren't goin' anywhere for a bit, so c'mon over and have a bite while Bill and Chuck fix your tire."

"Won't take but half an hour," squeaked Bill.

Helen would just as soon have waited at the station, but she realized she was hungry. "Besides," she thought, "I can fill the thermos."

Helen expected a bell to jingle when she opened the door and was surprised to hear nothing. She was not surprised when the people at the counter spun around on their stools to see who came in, or by the baby in a high chair throwing crackers, or by the teenaged girl - probably Jeannie - delivering burger baskets.

Arlene motioned for Helen to sit near the window, which overlooked the lake. While Arlene went for coffee, Helen's trained eye assessed the shoreline for development possibilities. The lake was about two miles across with bits of beach scattered among cedars and a few boats held people whose fishing poles poked out of the weeds.

Arlene returned with the Bunn-o-matic decanter and poured two splashless cups of coffee. She motioned for Helen to take a menu from between the napkin dispenser and the catsup bottle and said she would be back as soon as she refilled everyone's cups. Helen saw Arlene chitchatting and Jeannie signal that she would be right over. Helen thought it strange to be a customer when, such a short time ago, she was a waitress about Jeannie's age. She felt a wave of pity, but wasn't sure for whom.

"Howdy," said Jeannie setting down a glass of water. "What can I get for you today?"

"I don't know. What do you suggest?" said Helen.

"Well, our senior class voted our cheeseburgers the food most likely to be in Heaven," said Jeannie.

"Sounds good— guess I'll have one. And some fries, too," said Helen. Then she asked, "Are you a senior?"

"Sure am. And glad to be done with school. I got plans."

"I'll bet you do," said Helen, understanding. "Moving far?"

"Movin'? You kiddin'? I got plans for this place. Gonna put in a dock down there for starters. Then people can come by boat. Be nice, don't ya think?" explained Jeannie.

Helen just nodded her head. Jeannie took the order slip back and Helen stared out the window.

"Nice - ain't it?" asked Arlene, sitting down. "God's country. That's what we call it."

"Yes. It's very - uh - peaceful," said Helen.

"On vacation?"

"Oh, no. I haven't been on a vacation since . . .," Helen tried to think.

"I'm on a business trip."

"Sounds like the business owns you," laughed Arlene. "I know how it is when you're young and tryin' to get ahead. We're lucky now. Jeannie takes over quite a bit."

Helen tried not to think of her departure from her parents' place as well as from their lives. She was spared the agony of insight by the sight of Chuck in the doorway.

"Tire's fixed good as new," said Chuck.

"Thank you so much," said Helen. She started to leave, but sat down when she saw Jeannie bringing her order.

"You sit and enjoy your lunch—no charge," said Chuck to Helen. Then to Arlene, "C'mon, Ma - fish won't wait all day."

Helen's food was indeed heavenly. She ate as if she were starving and only stopped when she saw "Chuck and Arlene's Sex House" pull up to the lake. She watched the couple unloading tackle boxes and poles and saw Chuck help Arlene into the small fishing boat. He waded out to just below his Bermudas, gave his wife a kiss, and then boarded the boat.

It was a simple kiss and a simple scene, but as the couple grew smaller as they trolled away, Helen wondered if she and Neil would ever 'go fishin.' Or would all their trips be like his proposed honeymoon—blending business? She thought of her parents, too, and wondered if they had ever 'gone fishin.'

Helen got up, left a generous tip and made two calls on the pay

phone. The first was to Traverse City to cancel her reservation. The second was to Neil's answering service to say she would be in the office when he got back from the Caribbean.

As she went out the door, Jeannie came running with Helen's thermos. "Hey - you forgot this," said Jeannie.

"Thanks, but I don't need it. I'm on vacation and I know a place where there's plenty of coffee."