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Cecil and the Snow Plow

Snow plowing had not seemed a major issue when Cecil moved to Carp in 1948. "Carp-ob-der-Carp," he would joke with his friends to be sure they realized he had not become a rustic when he moved to the Ottawa Valley hamlet. "In, but not of, the village," he would say, quoting his professor of Old Testament languages. His profession as a translator did not call for much driving and allowed him to make his living in a community made up mainly of farmers. His work was done by mail -- eight and a half by fourteen sheets of wax Gestetner masters typed laboriously and corrected with nail polish -- and occasionally by phone. "Eight-Two, Carp" was his telephone number, and adopting a strategy he had heard about from the Navaho radio operators in the US Navy, Cecil would speak French to his wife or to business contacts when he didn't want the operator at the Monk Rural Telephone exchange to understand the conversation.

This use of foreign languages, the urban occupation, and the fact that Cecil had paid for the wire to have a private number rather than a party line, made him an object of curiosity in Carp. This was even more so since Cecil and his wife, Marika, lived in a house which was not visible from any road, deliberately built in the back of a large lot,

nested in the trees. "Cut down these trees and you'd have a good view," said Stanley the oil truck driver.

If Cecil and Marika were content to live privately in the trees in their small cottage, many people were concerned to see what there was to see. This included another, second Cecil (pronounced "Seesell" and joked about by Cecil as "my namesake") the local invalid who wandered the roads between Arnprior and Ottawa in a pith helmet, winter and summer. Second Cecil would, by times, accept a lift from Cecil and would also sneak looks in through the raspberry canes and bush at the small A-frame in the trees. Fred, the farmer across the road and recipient of the Mons Star in the First Great War, had worked on the building of the house. He marvelled that Marika had insisted that the pine boards with which the house was finished not be painted. But then, she was foreign and an artist. Ester, who taught Grade Four in the public school in Carp, had seen that there were no curtains on the large windows and told her bridge group, with a significant look but some refinement, that Cecil and Marika were capable of dining al fresco on warm summer nights, hidden as they were from public view.

Certainly the couple received post cards from time to time in languages other than English. Handing several pieces of mail to Cecil one day at his rural mail box, Ira, the route driver, made sure that a post card written in German was face up as he handed it over. Ira had his thumb on the text and looked intently into Cecil's face as he passed the post card through the car window. On another day Ira dropped off a parcel

at the house. Looking around to see that Marika was not in earshot, he asked, "Sleep with your wife?"

The memory of the war was still fresh in Carp in 1948, although Cecil and Marika never talked about it. Cecil had fought in the Canadian army and had lost almost all of his European relatives between the war itself and the Soviet takeovers in Eastern Europe. Marika had been the only girl in a class of fifteen in her high school year and lost every one of her classmates in the war. Cosmo, who drove the milk truck and the snow plow and who had been named for the Vancouver politician "Amor de Cosmos," was curious about what these "foreigners" had done in the war. "We bought Victory Bonds," said Cosmo. "What did your family do?" "They died," said Marika.

It was shortly after this that Cecil started having snow piled in the mouth of his lane. To be truthful it was only infrequently that Cecil had to take the car out at all, but one Wednesday after a big snow fall in January, 1949 he had dug himself out to drive to pick up a visitor who was coming into the airport in Ottawa. And, after a three-hour drive in and out on Highway 17, Base Line and Hunt Club road, he had found his lane plugged with snow again although it had not snowed. He had had then to dig himself in, just to get off the road.

The next morning the lane was full of snow again. As he reached the highway he met Fred, the farmer from across the road, standing with his mail in a lane miraculously free of snow. "Cosmo lifts the wing of the plow as he goes by," said Fred, stonefaced. "Keeps from plugging the lane up."

Unfortunately, 1949 was a bad year for snow and Cecil found himself constantly digging out his lane, and this started to be an issue with him. He would dig out his lane each time it was plugged up, even if he didn't need to take the car out. "I'll have to buy a tractor," he told Marika. "Just for the snow."

In retrospect, one would agree that writing a letter to the Huntley Township Council was not a strategy likely to lead to a good result. At the time, though, Marika had encouraged Cecil to write a letter because he was not mechanical and she was genuinely afraid that he would really buy a tractor and have an accident. "My wife and I live on the Old Carp Road," wrote Cecil. "And we would be thankful if your snow plough driver could raise his wing as he crosses our lane to avoid plugging our drive with snow."

Omar, the reeve, was confused when he read the letter at the next council meeting. Ira, the township secretary and rural postman, clarified: "It's the Russians who live in the house you can't see on the Old Ottawa Road." The road was only called "Old Carp" from the Ottawa end and Ira had concluded, on the basis of post cards and other mail, that Cecil and Marika were Russians.

The letter was passed around and Omar and Ira looked to Cosmo, the snow plow driver and township councillor. Cosmo read the letter. "Who's he calling a pluff?" asked Cosmo.

Omar and Ira were startled. "Pluff?" asked Ira. "What's he trying to say by calling me a 'snow pluff driver?'" said Cosmo, pointing to the letter. "'Plow' is spelled P-L-O-W,

not P-L-O-U-G-H." Actually, Cecil had thought his letter a marvel of concise communication but had not resisted the temptation to spell "plow" in the English manner. Given an occasion, he would also spell "role" with a little hat over the "o", as another little vanity subtly to underline his education and his knowledge of English.

Going to the heart of the matter, Omar asked, "Well, what should we do? Do we want a letter?" Omar was not enthusiastic about a written reply. This could invite a lengthy correspondence, about which Omar was uncomfortable, and besides, on general principles, it seemed a poor idea to leave a written record.

"We'll let the minutes show we commend Cosmo for keeping the road clear, thus ensuring the safety of all in the township," said Ira. This flew rather in the face of Cosmo's well-known habits of driving the milk truck and snow plow straight up the centre of the road and refusing to do more than slow down for stop signs.

Then Ira demonstrated his facility for expedients. "And, we'll tell Cosmo to raise the wing of his plow when he crosses lanes, as long as we have received a written request for him to do so. The minutes will show we're not responsible for the consequences." People had been known to say that Ira was "slick."

"Consequences?" asked Cosmo.

"If you raise your wing, you might just knock off their mailbox, by accident, like..." said Ira.

Which, the very next morning, is what Cosmo did.

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