

Rudi Aksim
Box 86
Carp Ontario Canada K0A1L0
613-839-2990
rudi@aksim.org

Short Drive

Hot is hot: late August in the Ottawa Valley; an unbearable humid crazy-making night of the kind we had before we had climate change or air conditioning. Moths and mosquitoes circled wildly around the light in the yard and banged against the windows. Cecil, who moved to Carp in the 1950s with his wife Marika, had spent the day working on a translation. Although they had lived in Carp for some years, they were still seen as strangers. His name was pronounced “Sessel” unlike his namesake, “Seesel”, who lived further down the road. That Cecil had come to Carp to work on a paving crew. His job was to draw the heavy canvas belt back and forth to give the road a non-skid surface. In retirement he had integrated well with the village. He hitch hiked the roads with one arm bandaged from an old accident, wearing a stained pith helmet. In season, he would appear with hands full of berries, which he would offer to sell to people he met.

“We’re in, but not of, the village,” our Cecil would joke, quoting his old teacher of Old Testament languages. Cecil didn’t work in Carp. He did translations and drove regularly into Ottawa, twenty miles away. He gave Humphrey, the Postmaster, a ride into town one day. “Sleep with your wife?” Humphrey asked. And Marika wasn’t a member of the WCTU. They both spoke several foreign languages – French would count as foreign in Carp in the 1960s. And they wore shorts on hot days.

Cecil was wearing his disreputable kaki shorts left over from the army, no shirt, but a silk stocking on his arm so he could write on the paper without sticking to it. Marika sat on a chaise longue, her hair and arms limp. She was wearing the shortest shorts she had and a white T-shirt. This was in the house you can't see in the bush, on the Old Ottawa Road, which, as everyone knows, is called the Old Carp Road from the Ottawa end. You turn left where Acres barn used to be.

And it was a good thing that no-one could see in. No one wore shorts in Carp in the sixties, except for Cecil, who sometimes wore long Bermudas into the village. He was, after all, from Europe, and had lived in London and Washington before coming to this hamlet in the Ottawa Valley. His attire invited comment, for this was a farming community and also somewhat lost in time. This was the year that the Highway 17 bypass was completed and Carp started to become a bedroom community for people working in Ottawa. Till then, it simply took too long to drive up the old Highway to work in the city.

Shorts were big city clothes. In Carp, men wore overalls and odd, square-crowned tractor caps, except in Church. None of these clothes fit very well, since they came from the Farmers' Coop or Eaton's catalogue. Even the local MLA wore overalls when he was in the village. But his overalls had horizontal creases from the delivery box and no touch of barnyard on them. Also, conceptions of female decency were different from what they are now. This was before pant suits and bikinis. Women and girls in school wore dresses. In Carp it was not unusual to see a woman on the street with hair curlers on her head, covered over by a scarf, but certainly no shorts.

Cecil swam, more than walked, through the house and stood in the porch. He didn't sit, for all the chairs were sticky with the humidity. He listened to the whippoorwill calling down the lane. "Let's go for a drive," he suggested. "At least the air will be moving."

Marika made a tearing sound as she got up from the canvas-covered chaise longue. They walked across the yard to the grey Chevy that Cecil had brought back the long way from Oshawa years before. A car was cheaper if you took the train to the factory and picked it up there. The Chevy's plastic seats glistened with sweat and they stuck fast when they sat. They backed around the maple in the yard and out the bumpy lane to the road. They rolled down the windows and turned the little triangular vent windows so they would scoop air into the car.

"Left, or right?" Cecil asked, restarting a game they played every Sunday. They would go for drives on back roads around Carp. At each crossroads someone would call out a random direction: left, right or straight. This often became a kind of adventure. They might come across little collections of buildings they'd not seen before, or suddenly discover themselves driving into, say, Fitzroy Harbour, from a new direction. The gravel concession roads might become grassy tracks that petered out in the brush near abandoned log buildings. Surveyors had imposed a grid on the landscape in the 1830s but that didn't mean that the roads had actually been put through. These roads criss-crossed the often sunny valley of the Carp River, meandering and slow but sometimes with high, mounded banks where it had been dredged at some point in the past. Taking these roads in the spring could be very surprising. This was before housing

developments and tile drainage and the river flooded every spring around Easter, filling the fields between the paved roads and cutting the First Line of March in two places.

“Right,” said Marika, hanging her arm out the window and enjoying the rush of air as the car gathered speed. After a few turns the gravel road straightened and they came to the Third Line of Huntley, and then to Highway 44, east of Carp.

I don't know if you know Carp. The Third Line of Huntley joins Carp and Stittsville. It's a straight east-west road running through, well, Huntley. Were one to ask for directions to Stittsville in Carp, one would be told: “You take the Third Line. The first crossroads is Highway 44. Go right and that's Almonte. You don't go there. Go left, and that's Ottawa. You don't go there. Go straight.” And so on through each intersection on the road, being careful not to take the Old Almonte Road to the right at Huntley. Traditionally, it's been important in Carp carefully to eliminate all potential errors before pointing out the correct path.

As they passed the Fourth Line of Huntley, they could see the lights at Carp Airport and the dark highway leading past Corkery to Almonte. And, off to the right, just beyond the Fifth Line, was the wide cut in the bush where the new roadbed for Highway 17 was being built.

“Right,” said Marika and they drove onto the Fifth Line of Huntley. Out of the dark a little road appeared, leading off into the bush. “Left!” Marika called out. “You're feeling brave,” said Cecil. “I don't remember this road. It'll probably peter out.”

But the road didn't fade away, it got bigger and led past several *Road Not Open* and *No Entry* signs to the new roadbed for Highway 17. And they could see, in the lights

from the old Chevy, that it was paved! Cecil stopped the car at the edge of the gravel and looked out at the new, untravelled road, stretching out in both directions into the dark.

“Right!” sang out Marika with real enthusiasm this time and Cecil pulled out onto the brand new road. The headlights swung across the trees, across the piles of muddy earth where ditches would someday be, and then onto the black, unpainted expanse of the new highway.

For this drive so far, Cecil had been driving along the bumpy gravel roads at maybe 25 miles an hour, but now he soon had the Chevy at 35, then 40, then 50 miles an hour. “Isn’t this fun,” thought Cecil, as they flew down the new highway, cooled by the rush of air coming in the windows and full of delight at this illicit course on the new highway.

The new road wound through the trees, along a low ridge. “This is a nice road,” shouted Cecil, over the wind coming through the windows, and the car hit 60 miles per hour as they drove up a little rise.

The pavement suddenly ended. The car was airborne for a moment and then sank, with a glub, into the swampy land beyond the end of the road. Cecil turned off the engine, but not the headlights. “How badly do you think we’re stuck?” he wondered. Marika was struggling to open the door. She had to push it against the mud, which was over the wheels and had flowed in over the bottom of the car doors. She stepped out and was immediately up to her knees in slime. The hot still air was suddenly full of insects. “We’re pretty stuck,” she said.

In a world before cell phones, someone would have to walk out for help. Cecil reasoned they weren’t all that far from the Fifth Line, so he could get to a farm fairly

quickly. They were probably close to Herb Caruthers's farm. Cecil knew him, so he felt he could probably approach him, in the middle of the night, in shorts, and covered in mud. When they had first met, Cecil had asked after him in Carp. "Do you know his brother Ernie?" he was asked. Ernie was the vet and Cecil did know him. "Well, he doesn't look like him."

So Marika got back in the car and rolled up the windows. She was in there with what seemed to be hundreds of insects. She was swatting wildly with both hands as Cecil set off grimly across the marshy land in the direction of the Fifth Line.

By the time Marika had the insects in the car down to mere scores, she could see lights coming, tentatively, along the new road. One set of lights, two, three. As they came closer, it was a tow truck, a station wagon and a half-ton with six or seven men sitting in the box. If they'd had a piano it would have been a fair re-enactment of the parade that marked the end of World War Two in Carp.

The procession stopped at the edge of the pavement and there was Cecil, recognizable in his shorts. Then three, five and then some dozen men were standing in the truck lights: in fact, everyone who had been drinking beer in the Esso station in Carp when the call for help came in.

Now, I don't need to tell you what happened after they hooked the tow cable to the Chevy and it was time for Marika, in her short shorts and T-shirt, to step out of the car. To Cecil, she looked, in the truck lights, rather like Aphrodite on the clam shell. How did she look to the overall-clad men in ball caps, several carrying stubby bottles of beer? It's not for me to say. But hot is hot and short is, well, short. Enough, perhaps, that several citizens of Carp were suddenly initiated into the way people dressed in more

cosmopolitan climes. Certainly, for many evenings to come, this caused much reflection and debate in the backroom of Neiburt's Esso Station in Carp.

– Rudi Aksim

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