

Aunt Helen at the Beach

by Helen Olson

Aunt Helen denies any memory of this story, but it is planted so vividly in my memory that I have no doubt at all about its veracity.

It was a hot summer day. I was probably about 10 and visiting Aunt Helen and Uncle Claire for a week or so. As we often did, we went to Clark Lake for a swim and a picnic. I loved to go to Clark Lake because we could have both warm water and a sandy beach in the same lake.

It must have been a Sunday, because Uncle Claire was with us, which wouldn't have been the case during the week. I think my friend Marty Goings was with us, too, as was usually the case. We were all in our bathing suits and running in and out of the water. Aunt Helen had on her polka dot two-piecer with a skirt. Uncle Claire, of course, had on a navy blue wool suit with a belt, just like practically every other man there. As was also predictable, he went wandering off down the beach on his own, probably to escape the noise and carry on.

We got into a water fight and began splashing one another, running in and out of the lake to get our sand buckets full of water.

Suddenly Aunt Helen said, "watch this." She leaned off the little wooden dock and dipped her towel in the water. Then she went tearing down the beach and smacked the wet towel across the broad back of a man in a navy blue bathing suit.

The man turned around. It wasn't Uncle Claire. Aunt Helen began back-pedaling and sputtering all at the same time. The guilty towel hung at her side. "I...I...I thought you were my husband" she stammered. He clearly wasn't.

We kids collapsed in hysteria on the sandy beach.

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Storm Rescue
By Helen Olson

I opened up *The Writer's Almanac* this morning on my computer. A single poem and a few lines about literary or historic anniversaries seem to me a perfect way to start a day. Today's poem is *The Same Cold*, by the poet Steven Dunn. It talks about the biting cold of a Minnesota blizzard. It could have been talking about any one of the many blizzards of my Northern Michigan childhood, when the shared experience made everyone a bit more thoughtful and a bit more concerned for the welfare of others. Near the beginning it says,

"the cold made good neighbors of us all,
made us moral because we might need
something moral in return, no hitchhiker
left on the road, not even some frozen
strange-looking stranger turned away
from our door."

And at the end,

Once, on Route 23, thirty below,
my Maverick seized up, and a man
with a blanket and a candy bar, a man
for all weather, stopped and drove me home.
It was no big thing to him, the savior.
Just two men, he said, in the same cold.

It made me think of my Dad, Jack/Johnny Olson. Daddy was a worrier. Daddy worried about a lot of things, with the safety and well-being of his wife and children at the top of the list. But then his worry spread out to his extended family, friends, neighbors, and complete strangers. I remember him screeching to a halt and backing up to pick up a trio of hitchhikers in his tiny Corvair that already contained me and my mother. "Jesus, Isabel," he said as he backed up, "They've got a kid with them." Later, he yelled at me for one of the few times that I can remember, because I opined in my know-it-all college-girl way that the child was clearly retarded. "All she needs is a good bath and some love," he said.

Daddy especially worried about cars going into the ditch in storms and the passengers either freezing or, more likely, dying of carbon monoxide poisoning from running the engine to keep warm. His worry wasn't strictly confined to ditched motorists. My brother-in-law, Lloyd, knew all too well that if he and my sister Kathryn, when they were courting, sat in the driveway with the motor running too long, Daddy would step out on the porch to be sure they were still alive.

In the winter, Daddy seemed to sleep with an ear cocked for the sound of racing motors. Since we lived on a long, often icy, grade, we rarely got through a winter without at least one incident in which Daddy would hear a car trying to get out of the ditch and would get up in the middle of the night and go out on the tractor to pull the stranded motorist back on the road. Once in awhile, the car was too stuck, or the storm was too fierce, and we would wake up in the morning to a stranger at breakfast, his having spent the remainder of the night on the couch in our living room.

One such incident stands out. It was around the Thanksgiving weekend in 1950.¹ I was then in my early-teens and, to put it mildly, a sound sleeper. I came downstairs on a Sunday morning to a house full of people. Mother was busy making copious pots of coffee and setting out plates full of homemade bread toast with butter and preserves. Daddy was bustling around helping and making

plans for the rescue. Just then, a man came up to Daddy, somewhat apologetically, to say that he'd arrived later than the others and he hoped my parents wouldn't be upset that they had let him in.

It seems that just as Kathryn's dateⁱⁱ was bringing her home, a group of about 11 people came straggling into the driveway. They were the last of a wedding party that had taken place at the Caledonia Township Hall, a mile and a half away. Some of the men, including one quite elderly man, wore tuxes and some of the women were in long dresses. There were a couple of children with them. They had stayed behind after the party to clean up a bit, and discovered when they left the hall that one of their cars would not start. They had all squeezed into the one remaining car to attempt a trip home to the other side of the county. That car slid off the road at the bottom of our hill, about half a mile away. They had first knocked on the door of our neighbor, John Beck. He was a kind man, but apparently was frightened by this motley crew of strangers and didn't open the door. By the time they got to our house, another quarter mile up the road, they were getting pretty desperate.

Kathryn let them in and woke up the folks. Her date went home to Lincoln, which was 15 miles away. This seems now to be a rather foolish undertaking in the still-raging ice storm, but the date was young. I suspect he also knew that he had no way of letting his mother know where he was, because we had no phones. Kathryn points out that he also drove a heavy car, which would do better than some in ice and snow.

Mother got out all our towels for people to dry themselves off and all our extra blankets. They hung up the wet outer garments over the living room stove. People settled down as best they could. Since there was nothing more they could do to help that night, Mom and Dad went back to bed in their bedroom right off the living room. At first, the stranded strangers were kind of restless. The folks would hear someone, especially the elderly grandfather of the bride, say something and then everyone else would say, "shhhhh." Eventually, quiet, except for some heavy breathing, settled over the house. Some time later that night, the apologetic stranger also slid off the road. Like the wedding party, he started out walking to see if he could find a safe haven. He saw the light in our house and when he came to the door, members of the wedding party let him in, assuring him it would be OK and saying that there was no reason to wake my parents again.

After their coffee and toast breakfast (mother felt apologetic that we didn't have enough eggs!), Daddy and some of the younger men set off to liberate all the cars. By then, the storm was over and the sky was clear and blue, though it was still dangerously cold. Brother John,ⁱⁱⁱ who was only about eight, remembers that Daddy had to chip ice off the carburetor and other tractor parts to start it. John says he remembered being frightened of all the people in the house, but not so frightened that he would pass up the chance to be on the tractor with Daddy. They pulled the two cars out of the ditch and then went to the Hall to jump-start the other car. The rest of the folks were picked up and everyone went home. By noon, our life was back to normal.

We later learned that the bride and groom had also slid in the ditch and had walked back to the hall where they spent the night.

Lloyd tells us that he took his date to her home in Hubbard Lake Village, and then had to make multiple tries before he could get his car around the bend and up a long hill near the south end of Hubbard Lake on his way back to Lincoln.

ⁱ We can confirm this date because Kathryn remembers that it was her first year in college and she was home for the holiday. Lloyd remembers the storm, because it was shortly before he was sent to Korea for the "police action." He also remembers that the day after the storm, he went out with some friends to do a "deer round-up." In this traditional hunting season event, some hunters would be posted at deer crossing sites, while others would approach from another direction making a lot of noise and driving the deer ahead of them toward the hunters.

ⁱⁱ Kathryn and Lloyd did not start dating seriously until Lloyd returned from Korea. That evening she was out with Garry Somers, a friend of Lloyd's from Lincoln. Lloyd was out with a distant cousin of ours, Arlene Larson.

ⁱⁱⁱ I sent the original of this story to Kathryn and John for corrections and additions. When John sent his comments back, he added, "Didn't we have wonderful parents!"