

An excerpt from *Helen in Trouble* by Wendy Sibbison

Pegasus

After fifteen rings someone finally picked up, and a gruff voice said, “Mason.” Helen politely greeted Francie’s father, introduced herself, and asked if Francie could come to the phone, please.

“She’s in the barn,” he said. “She’ll call you back.” He hesitated, then added, “Helen,” and hung up. About a half hour later, the phone rang and Helen snatched up the receiver. Francie. After each of them ran around their houses checking all the extensions, Helen asked Francie point-blank if she would help her get through the miscarriage part of the abortion. “I’d need to come down there, maybe Tuesday, and I have to leave by Friday. I start work a week from tomorrow.”

Francie said yes right away. She assured Helen that she was well-experienced in large mammal obstetrics. Helen laughed uneasily. Francie thought it would be best if she stayed at her mother’s house across the field. She didn’t explain why, only that she’d call her mother and call Helen right back. In ten minutes, the plan was set. Helen called Trailways for the bus schedule, then went downstairs to ask her parents if she could visit Francie for a few days before starting her summer job. They said yes.

Two days later, Helen was on a bus to Warrenton, a forty-mile trip. As the housing developments of Northern Virginia thinned out and gave way to open farmland, she remembered the last time she traveled through this landscape. On the

train in mid-April, the fields in Fauquier County had been brushed with a haze of spring green. Now the pastel haze had changed into dark olive bales of hay strewn about in the blazing sun. She saw a group of Negro men bringing in the bales; some hauled them across the field on their shoulders and heaved them onto a flatbed truck and others stacked them. Helen, brought up in a segregated world to be against segregation, was just starting to comprehend the rigidity of the system. Even picking up hay bales was segregated. All of a sudden she saw in her mind the white and brown faces of Pearl and Ilse, that crackerjack team, and almost cried out with gratitude and admiration. For the rest of her life, she will associate rule-breaking with goodness.

Francie was waiting for Helen at the bus stop in her father's battered pickup. As the bus pulled in, she started honking the horn. The old colonial town of Warrenton was a genteel, frosty place full of horsey people, who met this disturbance with disapproving stares. Francie could care less. Not only did she not give a damn what others thought, she had the aristocrat's sense of belonging wherever she was. In Francie, this potentially obnoxious quality was more than offset by authentic charm: her enthusiasm for whatever she was doing, her warmth, her adoration of her friends, her competency without a trace of pride. To know Francie was to love her. Unless, of course, you were someone for whom the letter of the law was all, like St. Joan's headmistress. Then Francie was your nemesis.

Helen climbed down the steps of the bus and started running toward the truck. There was her ally, her loyal friend. Francie leaped down and ran toward Helen.

“Hell-bird, Hell-bird, thou hast come to the boonies!”

Helen hugged Francie tight, then pulled back to study her. “My Froggie,” she said, “thou hast taken on the guise of a rude mechanical!”

Francie wore tattered blue jeans—in those days, strictly farm apparel—a white shirt with short sleeves rolled up, and riding boots. Her tousled, bleached-blond hair showed an inch of brown roots which, like so much of Francie’s bearing, created the effect of unintended glamor. Her rectangular face, with its strong jaw, was a ruddy tan. Francie had turned back into the wild creature she had been before her parents shipped her off to St. Joan’s for taming. She laughed. “Everything reverts to type eventually. Says my grandmama.”

Francie tossed Helen’s suitcase in the truck bed and they were off. Her family’s property was in a town called Paintbox, which appeared on no map that Helen could find, some fifteen miles from the county seat of Warrenton. Helen brought Francie up to date. Yesterday morning the catheter had fallen into the toilet as she was peeing. She had to fish it out with her fingers, wash it off, roll it up in toilet paper, and stash it in her suitcase for disposal far from home.

Francie said, “Let’s ditch it right now,” and a few minutes later pulled up to a Mobil station with a single pump and a peeling red flying horse on the roof. “See this place? They haven’t put out the trash since before I was born.” Helen retrieved the

wad from her suitcase and they entered the unlocked, filthy restroom. Sure enough, an overflowing garbage can. Helen tossed the wad on top and Francie shoved it down into the trash with a toilet plunger. They ran back to the truck, jumped in like thieves, and Francie burned rubber.

Ten minutes later, she asked Francie if they were near Paintbox. The road, now dirt, wound through rolling fields and an occasional stand of forest.

“Honey, that filling station *was* Paintbox. Jim’s Mobil and Paintbox Post Office. Where we are now is Daddy’s land. Red Oak Farm.”

“But I didn’t see any sign.”

“Daddy’s not fond of signs. He says everybody knows where he lives.”

As they cleared a small rise, several buildings came into view. From this distance, Helen could make out what looked like a low-slung house, set by itself, and then farther down the road a grey house, two massive barns, a water tower, and some smaller outbuildings. At the horizon rose the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains, and in all directions there was no sign of a single other building—only bright green fields and dark green stands of woodland. Here and there a stone wall bisected a field, running up and down gentle hills and eventually disappearing into trees. Helen took all this in. What did they do with so much space? Her reference point was the suburbs, where you owned a yard. A farm, in her mind, had cows, pigs, and chickens and grew corn. Francie’s dad had horses. They took up space. Then she wondered

where among these fields, trees, and buildings she would have the miscarriage. It was too early to bring this up. She was Francie's guest.

"Quite a spread," she said, hearing her own Dad in her head.

Francie glanced over at her and laughed. "Quite a spread? What movie are you in?"

"I give up. What movie am I in?" They passed the first house.

"It's obvious," said Francie as she pulled into the driveway of the second house. "Gidget Goes Equestrian." She jumped out and grabbed Helen's suitcase. "C'mon. This is the farm house. Meet the old man."

Helen braced herself. She already was a bit afraid of Francie's father, and the house they were about to enter looked to her like the setting of a horror movie. It was a tilted, two-story affair made of huge grey rocks fitted together like a puzzle with no visible caulking. Looming overhead was a brick center chimney which, like the stones, seemed far out of proportion to the modest size of the house. Curtainless windows stared out at her. The steps to the unpainted back door were uneven slabs of stone, with no handrail. The house seemed to say, "Enter at your own risk."

Francie shooed Helen up the steps and bounded up after her. The back door led into the kitchen, which ran along the whole back of the house. This was unlike any kitchen Helen had ever seen. The stove was black cast-iron on top and cracked green enamel on the front and sides. The sink, sunk into a long wooden cabinet, was some kind of dark grey material and featured an actual hand pump. Where were the faucets?

A soot-blackened fireplace, as wide as a car and tall enough to stand in, loomed in the middle of the inside wall, and in front of it stood a wooden table and what Helen thought of as old-fashioned chairs, with no padding on the seats and long spindles for backs.

Helen said, “Um, Froggie, I gotta ask, what movie are *you* in?”

“Now that is a good question. The answer changes from day to day. But if you just mean the house, Daddy’s Daddy’s Daddy’s Daddy’s Daddy”—here Francie counted on her fingers to make sure she had the right number—built it in 1692, and, so far as I know, the only thing that’s been changed is the hole for the crapper.”

“The crapper?”

“Outhouse, honey. It’s been moved a lot. But don’t worry. You’re staying in the new house with Mommy, and she has plumbing.” Francie opened a door next to the fireplace and shouted, “DADDY!” Then she disappeared through another door and returned with two orange sodas. “Nehi?” Helen nodded. Francie took an opener from a drawer, flipped the caps, and sat at the table. In an exaggerated country accent she said, “Have a set.”

Helen was swallowing her first mouthful of icy soda and thinking that Francie must have electricity and a refrigerator somewhere, when a medium-sized man strode into the room as if he owned the world. Helen couldn’t remember having ever been in the same room with someone who radiated this kind of confidence. Not just confidence. His carriage, his composure, his steady gaze, his stride—all suggested a

person who had never had a moment of confusion over who he was and what he was supposed to be doing. It will take Helen decades, when recalling Francie's father, to realize the source of his dazzling self-assurance: his unbroken connection to six generations of men preceding him and to the land they all tended. Even in 1963, such people were scarce in this country. Fred Mason was a very, very attractive man.

His old jeans and shirt were like Francie's, but his boots were Western, aged into a battered extension of his feet. His face was the same rectangle as hers, and his skin the same reddish tan. His light-brown hair was cut short enough so that it didn't need combing, just a quick rake of the hand—which he did now—and his blue eyes sparkled with attention wherever his gaze fell. The best thing about his face was his nose: large, ramrod-straight until the tip, which curved down like the beak of a raptor. Francie didn't get up when he entered. She talked to him in an easy, affectionate voice. "Hey, Daddy, meet Helen Bird."

"Miss Bird," said Fred Mason. "Pleased to make your acquaintance. I know Francie is right fond of you." He contemplated Helen.

She was awestruck, frightened, fascinated, and uncertain about what set of manners applied here. She decided to follow his lead and chose formality. She stood up, extended her hand, and said, "Hello, sir. Pleased to meet you. Thank you for having me." Even though she wasn't staying in his house, this felt like the right thing to say. Francie had talked as if everything in sight—including her mother's house—was under his dominion.

“Francie’s friends are always welcome. Enjoy your stay.” He lifted his chin in Francie’s direction and said, “Hot walk Freeform, four-thirty.” Then he rapped twice on the table and strode out the back door.

“Well, now you’ve met Daddy. Old school all the way.” Francie checked her watch. “Okay, let’s get over to Mommy’s and get you settled. You may or may not meet her while you’re here. She’s out a lot.”

Out a lot? Helen was going to be here for four days. Stashing her and her little time bomb with its unpredictable moment of explosion in an empty house made sense, of course. She just wasn’t expecting it. She hadn’t known what to expect.

Helen spent much of the four days alone, lying in the sun, re-reading *The Catcher in the Rye*, and taking hot baths. She never did meet Francie’s mother. Mrs. Mason either was truly away during this time or else, as Helen sometimes imagined, she kept herself well concealed. This would have been possible in her sprawling split-level house, where Helen was ensconced in her own suite with her own bathroom and a little kitchen, which she only entered to make herself a bowl of cereal or get a Coke from the fridge. Francie’s mother’s house, in stark contrast to her father’s, was chock full of twentieth century comforts: the windows had two sets of curtains, sheers and flowered chintz, the chairs were cushioned and upholstered, the toilet flushed, hot water ran from faucets, the lights blazed at the flick of a switch, and a swimming pool glittered on the side facing away from the farm house, as if to protect its inhabitants from the sight of such corruption.

Helen was mistaken in believing that Mr. Mason's house had electricity. Each night she went to supper at the farm house, where she, Francie, her sister Sam, Mr. Mason, and a woman everyone called Susan and whose place in the family was unstated, ate at the long kitchen table by the light of kerosene lamps. On the first night Helen went with Francie to the pantry to help fetch the Nehis which everyone drank with supper. There Helen was surprised to see not the refrigerator which she expected but a big wood-paneled cabinet cooled with blocks of ice. The icebox.

Francie apologized for spending so little time with Helen, but her father kept both daughters hopping. Fred Mason was a horse breeder and trainer, and his stables held jumpers, hunters, trotters, and flat racers, all thoroughbreds. As long as Francie and Sam lived on the farm, he considered them part of his staff and expected them to work for their keep. So from Monday through Saturday, from five-thirty in the morning to seven-thirty at night, with a half hour for lunch and an hour for supper, their days were spent grooming, feeding, handling, stabling and exercising horses and cleaning and maintaining the stables. Helen offered to help, but Francie said not to bother even bringing this up. Daddy wouldn't let Helen anywhere near the precious horseflesh.

Every night at eight, Francie and Sam, freshly showered, would troop into Helen's room, ready for anything that did not concern horses. Sam, although much taller than Francie, had none of the tall-girl awkwardness about her. She was as strong, sturdy and competent as her older sister, and, if anything, even more eager to get

some first-hand obstetric experience, human or otherwise, without Daddy breathing down her neck. Each daughter had had her small arm all the way up a cow's birth canal by the time she was six, and each had seen every kind of foaling and calving, from the easiest to the most agonizing. Each was an expert at beheading poultry, each had seen hundreds of animals slaughtered, each had seen exquisite, disabled horses shot between the eyes, and each had cut the throats of stunned pigs. Nothing to do with the physical structure of a living thing caused either girl to blink an eye. Francie told Helen that, when she told her sister that Helen had managed the abortion and was coming to the farm to miscarry, Sam begged to be allowed to help.

But no matter how many boiling hot baths Helen took and how much she jumped up and down afterward, her report to Francie and Sam was always the same: nothing. On the second night, a Wednesday, Sam suggested that she and Francie "take a look." Maybe help things along. Helen had to go home on Friday.

Modesty had become a luxury she could not afford, so she promptly agreed. While Francie and Sam fussed around her bed, debating how to arrange the pillows, Helen took off her shorts and underwear. Once the examining area was prepared to the sisters' satisfaction, Francie looked at the half-naked Helen and said, "Cute outfit, Hell-bird."

Sam said, "I'd add a pair of those little white party gloves. C'mon, let's see what's up."

Helen lay on her back and put her legs up on the mountain of pillows. On their way over that evening, the sisters had already decided to suggest the look-see and quarreled over who would be the first to inspect. Sam had won because she had been mucking out stalls all day while Francie got to exercise and groom two of the farm's champions.

“Well, let's see what we've got, okay?” Sam, like her sister and father, was plainspoken and Helen was glad for it. The last thing she needed right now was for anyone to be, or pretend to be, squeamish or apologetic. She opened her legs as she had at Pearl's less than a week ago. Sam was putting on a pair of those same stretchy gloves.

“Are those for farm animals?” she asked.

“You bet your boots,” Sam told her, starting the exam. As with Pearl, Helen focused on relaxing.

“Only the *best* gloves for Daddy's mares,” said Francie. “Sam, what do you see?”

“Something's happening here. Check this out.” Sam's tone was neutral, clinical.

“*What?*” Helen was staring at the ceiling, back in her there-and-not-there mode.

Francie gave Helen a pat on the knee. Like Pearl! “Just a minute, okay?”

“And try not to tense up,” said Sam.

Sam made room for Francie. She took one look and said, “Huh! What's that, do you think?”

Helen could stand it no longer. She raised herself up on her elbows and saw the sisters gawking at her vagina. “Tell me what the hell’s going on!”

Sam said, “There’s a kind of bubble thing just inside. Want to see it?”

Francie elbowed Sam in the ribs. “You don’t have to, Helen.”

Oh God. Part of her did and part of her didn’t. Francie and Sam were so damn interested, though. She decided to look. “Okay.”

The sisters moved to either side and Helen awkwardly leaned forward as far as she could. There was her first sight of her own vagina. The color alone was a shock, then interesting, bright red and purple. And there, popping out of it, was the slick surface of a smooth, whitish bubble. Jesus. She touched it with a finger.

“Whoa, Nellie!” said Francie. Helen snatched her hand back, horrified and fascinated. The bubble had been firm but with give, resilience. “Remember germs, girl!” Helen informed her that she was on antibiotics. Francie informed her that she was not to touch anything internal with ungloved hands, period.

Helen lay back on the bed. Could this possibly get any creepier? “Do whatever you think will help.”

Francie said, “It’s gotta be the amniotic sac, Sam, like what happened with Lady Sputnik, remember?”

“Yep,” Sam said. “And Daddy just reached in and sorta worked it out of her. I’m gonna try it.”

For ten minutes, Sam and Francie took turns trying to loosen the bubble from its hold on Helen's insides, as she grew ever more alarmed. Finally, they gave up.

Sam said, "It's hard to get purchase on the bugger."

"That, and it's just not ready to budge," said Francie. "Let's try again tomorrow night. Maybe it'll come out on its own before then."

"Oh, great," said Helen. "What if it does?" She started getting dressed.

Francie and Sam looked at each other.

"The bell," said Sam, and the sisters burst into laughter.

"Sorry, Helen," gasped Francie, "we know this isn't funny." She pinched Sam to make her stop, and Sam pinched her back. Francie explained that their mother was given to having "spells" and so, when Daddy built the house for her, he hung an old dinner bell so she could ring an alarm if she felt a spell coming on. Telephones were pretty useless at Red Oak Farm since the farm house was empty most of the day. Francie did not say what having a spell entailed, nor did she say why her mother lived in her own house or *where she had been all week*, and Helen did not ask. The sisters, however, obviously viewed the spells as a source of hilarity. By now it was after ten, and they had to get up at five the next morning, so they showed Helen the bell and headed back to the farm house. They assured her that, if they heard the bell, they would be at her side within minutes. They'd tell Daddy some story.

But there was no need. Helen spent Thursday as she had spent the other two days, except she checked the bubble with a scrubbed finger every half-hour or so and

nothing changed. Thursday night went the same as Wednesday night, with the sisters trying barnyard-birthing moves to get the bubble out with no success. Sam proposed piercing it after proper sterilization of instruments. Helen was so desperate that she was open to anything, but Francie would not hear of it. “That is the stupidest idea I have ever heard,” she said. “Sure, let’s help Helen—help her croak from sepsis.”

At noon on Friday afternoon, Francie and Helen climbed back in the pickup and drove back to the Warrenton bus station. Before Helen left Red Oak Farm, Francie brought her to the stables to say goodbye to Fred Mason. About ten feet from the open double doors, she called, “Daddy! Helen’s leaving!” Mr. Mason came out, pulling off leather gloves. He studied the girls with his eerie stillness.

“Thanks for having me, sir,” said Helen, shaking his hand.

“My pleasure, Miss Bird. Come again.” Without a smile or another word, he turned and walked back into the stable.

“Daddy hardly ever smiles,” said Francie as they walked to the truck. “Don’t read anything into it.”

At the Arlington bus station, Helen’s own dad was all smiles. “You’ve got quite a tan, honey,” he said. “You look nice and rested.” She told him about her time at the Masons’ farm, leaving out most of it. On the way home, she had kept one eye on her watch as she sobbed and sobbed in the tiny bus toilet. She had needed time between crying and arriving to manufacture a happy face for Dad. In less than seventy-two

hours she had to show up at the Modern Fashions Shoppe in Shirlington, ready to unpack boxes of blouses, skirts, and dresses and put them on hangers.