

## HUMOR

# Turn left at the dog

By Eileen Herbert Jordan



ROB DUNLAVEY

It is a fact of life that people attempting to reach a destination invariably feel it is their sad fate to be thwarted by people like me. They have married me. Or we are traveling cross-country together. Or I am their mother. In the latter case, they have an entirely warped adolescence, having spent their formative years apologizing to their peers for getting lost every time I am the chauffeur.

The thing is, they say, I have no sense of direction. I do not know left from right, east from west, north from south, odd from even. They shake their heads, as if the whole world were lost to me, and say I cannot find *anyplace*. It is a bum rap; I tell *them* they don't know how to listen.

Let me give you an example. Suppose you want to reach my apartment. You will come upon a small, square brick building situated on one corner; that is where you will make your turn. *Left or right?* they ask. *North or south corner?* The brick is not pink; nor is it the dark red of fireplaces. It is closer to terra cotta, or to Georgia soil. *What street is it?* they ask. Past it, on the opposite side, there is a sprawling white lacy Victorian frame house with wisteria drifting from the porch roof in springtime and a golden retriever sitting on the walk, behind the picket fence, every afternoon. *The name of the street?* they repeat. *The opposite side of what? Left or right?*

When you're this near, you've already turned off the main road,

where you passed the Lutheran church with the carillon (if you're lucky you may hear it) and that pretty old inn with the green-striped awning—the inn that has those wonderful popovers. *What main road?* they say. There is a drumming of fingers on the table. By now they are testy; very testy. From that point on, it is always them vs. me. It is them with their exit ramps and their route numbers, their 25As and their 40Bs, vs. me, who cannot read their maps.

And yet the fact is, I could lead you from their garage to my front door on a trip you would not be apt to forget. You see, I have a splendid sense of direction; it is just unique. I am rarely if ever lost. I may, once in a while, end in a place other than the one I intended to reach, but even that does not happen often, and when it does, it is almost always caused by the vagaries of the modern world, not me. If I tell you to circle once around the white clapboard Mariners' Haven Restaurant and it turns out that they are now calling it the Captain's Paradise Café, that shouldn't fool you. If they do that and also paint the clapboard blue, it can be tricky but should not be unsolvable. Besides, think of the richness of the journey!

None of this is unprecedented. My father was a naval man, a navigator, in the days when one navigated on the North Atlantic using only a sextant and the stars. Years later he used to take me outside at night to stand

beneath the sky and look up at the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper, at Cassiopeia and Orion. He showed me the way he charted a course and brought the ship to the safety of the shore with only the sky to help him.

I have been thinking lately about this business of direction. Perhaps it really hit me on a summer evening not long ago when I took a winding drive along the seacoast. It so happened that I did not know my companion, who was doing the driving that night, very well. The road curved like a half moon around the Sound. Ahead of us the sun was slipping into the water like a burnished apple, turning all the little fishing houses it touched along the docks to gold and the cattails behind them to flame. The sand dunes were bronzed for just a minute, then they began to disappear in the purple night sky. I caught my breath. Tennessee Williams wrote a poem once: *Evening is her name. She is waiting for you at the breathless height of the stairs. . . .*

"Say," my companion said to me, "are you sure that sign back there said *Parkway West?*"

"What?" I said.

"*Parkway West,*" he said. "I want to be sure we're heading west."

I did not, as I say, know him very well; it was obvious at that moment that I never would.

Maybe the way we read our landscapes is better than palmistry in defining us. Maybe our calligraphy does not reveal as much about us as our approach to a Rand McNally map. Maybe sometime we could even meet halfway, you on your road, me on mine.

One thing, though, if you are coming to my apartment: That golden retriever goes inside after dark. So if it's evening, the best thing to do is look up at the sky and find Cassiopeia. I'll be right below, waiting. ■

*The author's last article for MODERN MATURITY was "Tuned In, Turned Off" (August–September 1992).*