
Helen Remembers the Stork Club

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Old habits die hard. Every morning Helen wakes up at the same god-awful hour, the same time that Aggie used to start barking for his first walk of the day. Aggie is three years dead, ashes in a pink-and-gold J. C. Penney vase on the mantelpiece, and yet she still wakes up, come rain or come shine, come hell or high water, to walk a dead dog through the city streets and to see if anything's changed.

Has it? That depends on whether she looks out of her window or into her mirror. The city's springtime still brings blossoms to the little gated communities of daffodils on Park Avenue and summer's always stinking hot, except where spills of overchilled air from storefronts turn her sweat to icy tears as she walks by. Autumn in New York is one of the few things she still doesn't find to be overrated, but winter's a bitch that could give frigidity lessons to her fourth husband's third wife.

Today it's spring, and damn well about time. Each winter here seems to last just long enough for her to start a serious flirtation with making the move to Florida at long, long last. But then what? There's not enough money left in any of her accounts to pay for a little Pompano Beach *pied—terre* and still keep up the payments on her mint cond. pre-war high ceil. 2 BR, LR w/FPL, frml DR gem. It's rent-controlled, thanks be unto her dear, departed Daddy, who taught her the value of getting in on the ground floor with real estate deals. Of course he was talking about Pompeii, but Helen knows enough to sift through all the ve-ry slow-ly ut-tered instructions men benevolently insist on handing down to her. It's pearl-diving in pig-slop, sorting the really useful information from the don't-worry-your-pretty-little-head-about-it swill.

Her apartment is worth a fortune in today's market. If she went down to Florida only to discover that fist-sized cockroaches and aggressive mildew held no allure, she'd never be able to afford another place like this one; not in Manhattan, and she'll board Charon's ferry willingly long before she'll set foot on the Brooklyn Bridge, thank you *so* very much.

So she can't move, though the landlord would be ecstatic if she did opt out of the city. Every time he sees her, he looks at her with hot, hungry eyes. She knows it's no longer her flesh he craves to possess, but her real estate. *Plus a change, plus c'est la mme damn chose*. That's how it was with her first husband, too. Menelaus could have had his pick of plenty of other women once he discovered she'd flown the Spartan coop, but none of them would give him the political clout to continue to rule *her* kingdom. (Not that he ever told the truth of it to the Mykenaeen troops massed up to take her back from Troy. It's always best to claim you're fighting a war for high principles like love and honor, especially when you're playing out the bloody Punch and Judy puppet show with other women's sons.)

Helen slips her feet into backless blue terrycloth slippers with white daisies embroidered on the toes and shuffles into the bathroom. One of the forty-watt bulbs in the two-headed flower-blossom fixture over the sink blew out last Tuesday and she still hasn't gotten around to replacing it. She rather likes the dim and creamy light—it's kind to her. The deeper wrinkles near her eyes lose some of their power to cut her to the heart. Too bad the soft rings of sagging flesh around her neck refuse to do the same. They're her own personal choke-collar, and Grampa Kronos really gets a kick out of yanking her chain.

She sighs and thinks wistfully of her bed. If she went back between the sheets and didn't come out until tomorrow or the next day, would anyone notice? Would anyone care? Her friends are dead, dust and ashes and little brown bits of bone. She's grown too weary to bother making new ones: They'll only die and leave her all alone again, like Aggie did. She's heartsick at the very thought of facing more funerals for those she's loved. They're gone, all gone, and she really doesn't know why she hasn't joined them.

Oh, wait, yes she does: Death is boring. Not as boring as the good old days back in Sparta when all she had to look forward to was the loom by day and Menelaus grunting over her every second or third night,

but a close second.

Since death is not an option, she gets dressed and goes to Starbucks. The day passes with shopping at Bendel's and Bloomie's and Bergdorf's, a brief phone call to arrange matters for the coming evening, and tea at the Plaza Hotel. She's all by herself and looks well over thirty-five, so she's shunted aside despite her standing reservation until such time as it suits the *matre d'* to decide she's visible again. Age before beauty? This is Manhattan: Get real.

After tea there's time for one last spot of shopping—thirty-three hundred years old and she hasn't got a *thing* to wear tonight—so she strolls down Fifth Avenue to Saks. Just across the street from the great department store, St. Patrick's Cathedral catches the golden light of the declining sun, but Helen has no patience for any fading beauty but her own, especially when it comes from the enemy's camp. She glares at the towering spires and mutters dreadful imprecations against the upstart Galilean whose minions hounded Daddy to his death. Once upon a time, when Aggie was still alive, she'd stolen a handful of holy water from the font inside St. Patrick's, dribbled it into a self-sealing plastic baggie and brought it home for the dog to drink. It was a petty vengeance, one that did no good and made no difference, unless she counted Aggie's subsequent bout of tummy trouble and the cost of cleaning all her best rugs. She learned a valuable lesson from that: Misplaced faith can give you the runs.

She never thought it was a *good* lesson, merely valuable. There is a difference, as she herself proved when she first met Paris and stopped being good.

In Saks she's swarmed by cosmetics salesgirls as she tries to get from the front doors to the elevators. Scylla and Charybdis must be working on commission: On the one hand she's doused with the latest fragrance, on the other she's beset by unemployed actress/model maenads brandishing jars of overpriced glyceryl stearate-enriched promises. The Galilean would be shocked to learn that there can be no true miracles without faith *plus* retinol. She reads all the fashion magazines, she knows all the lies by heart, but knowledge is never proof against desire. Helen still holds onto a measure of magic, the last scrapings of her old powers. She *wants* to believe that if she stares long enough into the eyes of the painted waifs in the print ads and invokes Aphrodite while anointing herself with the prescribed creams and potions, she'll be granted the means to draw unto herself some measure of the models' youthful appeal and once more be the woman for whom empires tumbled and cities burned. And why not? This is America. Money is the greatest magic of them all.

It's just too tiresome a gauntlet to run if she wants to ascend to the Olympic heights of Better Dresses. She decides to dress for the evening out of the garments she's already got on hand. Just so her foray into Saks won't be for naught, she buys a spray bottle of *eau de* wishful thinking from an older saleswoman, a condescending creature with an affected accent that staggers back and forth between Merrick and Marseilles. Her face bears one less layer of shellac than the silver-blue nightmare roller coaster of her hair, but she seems to think she's caught her youth by the wings and captured it in amber.

"Are you *sure* you couldn't use something else?" she asks Helen as she slides the charge slip across the glass-topped counter. "Something for your face? We have a fabulous new line of renewal creams. I've dropped a few samples for mature skin into your bag. You *must* try them; they work wonders. I wanted to include a moisturizer, but I've only got the line-preventer left; the line-repair samples are all gone."

Helen signs the receipt and smiles.

"I don't like bullies," she tells her. "Especially not clumsy ones like you. You're old, and you never were beautiful; I can tell. I've got an eye for these things, if nothing else. Don't worry, it could have been worse. You might have been beautiful once, and now all you'd have left would be flimsy memories of how you used to—Oh, for the love of liposuction, are you *never* going to give me back my AmEx card, you

troll?" She snatches the snip of plastic from the goggle-eyed harpy's claws and strides out of Saks, swinging her hips in a manner sure to make aspiring pop music hos blush, lust, and/or take notes. She takes a small, blithe satisfaction in knowing that the baby vixens of a thousand videos can gyrate the goods till they start to sag from the sheer stress of all that centrifugal force, but they'll never have what Helen's got.

Just youth, the Furies whisper in her ear. She smells the breath of stale blood on their lips and knows that they're grinning. *Just youth*. Helen goes home weeping.

She deals with the tears before turning her attentions to the long, leisurely, scented bath, the freshly changed Porthault sheets, the bed itself sprinkled with rose petals. She lavishes herself with all the layers of fragrance that the fashion magazines recommend: Bath oil to body lotion, dusting powder to cologne to pulse-point perfume, Tinker to Evers to Chance for the grand slam-bam-thank-you-ma'am of love. It's astonishing that there's a man left unmarried out there, given all the play-by-play advice available in the glossies for landing the poor dumb brutes.

Her escort comes to pick her up at seven, as promised. He's in his late twenties and has the sort of pouty Bad Boy looks that Achilles would have been all over in a Myrmidon minute. She knows that when he smiles at her, compliments her looks, offers her his arm, he's only doing it because he's been bought and paid for. She smiles back, and tells herself she doesn't matter, it doesn't care.

Oh. Oopsie. Silly Helen. Stupid Freud.

Their evening is the same as many she's hired in the past: Drinking and dining and drinking and dancing and drinking and drinking and sex. You can't beat the classics. She has him take her to the Rainbow Room where there's still some hope of hearing dance music that doesn't make her guts tighten up into granny knots. This is followed by a session at the Algonquin where a smoky-voiced *chanteuse* croons jazzy torch songs that gently call up the dead. Helen sits cozied next to her boytoy not because she craves the nearness of him, but because the summoned spectres are hogging all the room.

"This is nice," she says, breathing in the fumes from her VSOP cognac, breathing in the music, breathing in the ghosts. "This is nice, but it's not the Stork Club."

"Huh?" says her date. And even in that automatic grunt, he manages to let her know that he really doesn't give a damn.

Helen is unfazed by this. "The Stork Club," she says again. "It was a wonderful place, a nightclub, special, beautiful, glamorous. Everyone who was anyone went there, and if you were *really* somebody, they'd let you into the Cub Room." She smiles, remembering being there, being that.

"Oh," her escort says, nodding, pressing together plump, ripe lips that are sometimes his meal ticket. "Sure, I understand: Like Studio 54. My mom always talks about Studio 54."

"Huh?" says Helen.

That's when he tells her she's the most beautiful woman in the world. It's only an accident that she catches him checking his watch just before he says that he really can't control himself much longer, he wants to get her alone, he wants her, and can they go back to her place now. She puts on a smile that's just as sincere as his recitation of work-for-hire desire and orders another drink instead.

Let her wait. Let that little girl, that child he's hoping to rendezvous with after he's serviced Helen, wait. (Helen knows there's another woman on his mind; he wears anticipation like aftershave.) Helen's paid her dues at the woman's waiting game: Waiting to marry; waiting for Menelaus to finish his business with her

body and let her sleep; waiting for Paris to get a clue that she *was* willing, and not just because Aphrodite was pulling the strings; waiting for the war to start, to end; waiting to hear Menelaus's verdict pronounced against her when the Achaeans finally took Troy and brought her back from the burning walls to stand before her sour-eyed cuckold.

That was when she'd made the waiting stop. Then, with Paris dead and kindly Hecuba driven barking mad, with Hector's little son thrown from the heights of the city's parapet, fragile skull and bones shattered on the rocks, solely because Agamemnon feared the possibility that those infant hands might someday take up sword and shield and vengeance.

That was when, with a flash of insight worthy of the best and brightest of Daddy's thunderbolts, Helen saw how much her husband's angry face had aged during the war years. He hadn't been a Cretan wall painting when she'd married him, but now he reminded her of a cured olive, so brown and wrinkled, hiding something hard and bitter at the core.

The legends claimed that her next move was sly and calculated, altogether womanly: She told him that if he wanted her dead she'd make it easy for him by giving his sword an unobstructed path to her heart. With those words she'd opened her gown, baring her breasts to the sun. They were perfect, firm despite all the children that she'd borne and suckled, white and round as ewe's-milk cheeses. Menelaus took one look and the bitter old man felt a sudden stiffening in the loins that made the most blood-soaked, smoke-stained Mykenaeen soldier look up from the Trojan woman he was raping and smile indulgently.

Sure, she's the reason why so many of our friends are dead, why we've wasted ten years of our lives at the business of slaughter, but just get a load of those tits! Don't try telling me that's not worth fighting for!

Helen's breasts are still pretty hot stuff, not that her escort will even notice. She makes a private bet with herself—his tip, double or nothing—that this handsome little sprat will either insist on the dusky mercy of candlelight in the bedroom or no light at all. She can almost hear him muttering his excuses in her ear, pleading Romanticism in the first degree when the truth is a charge of Premeditated Disgust. He'll screw an old woman for money, but *look* at that body first? Gross.

And the saddest part of it all is that he'll never know what he's missing. The face that launched a thousand ships is somewhat on the skids, but from the collarbone down, Helen is still Zeus's child. The flesh has dwindled here and there, but nowhere that counts, and the skin is still a creamy, rose-tinged white as smooth as any statue's skillfully sculpted arse-and-altogether.

Helen finishes her drink and sets the drained glass down slowly, deliberately stretching out the gesture just because she can. She lowers her silver-shadowed eyes and gives her pretty boy a surreptitious sideways glance through a jungle of false eyelashes and three coats of mascara: He's pouting. Let him pout. Let him learn patience and the womanly art of waiting. Slowly she uncoils her bones from the sweet, soft embrace of the lounge chair and smiles. "Shall we go?"

She doesn't step into the cab he hails and there's nothing he can do about it: She's the one in charge these days, much good it's done her. "Let's walk," she says. "There's something I want to show you." He trots along beside her as docilely as dear little Aggie ever did on walkies. Aggie always wanted to be fed, too.

She brings him to a little pocket park on East 53rd Street near Fifth Avenue. It's night, but it's a New York City night and that's a beast of a neon stripe. Shadows are not allowed to haunt the richer parts of this city any more than stars are allowed to lend its aging face the charity of their light. Helen takes her escort by the hand and sighs.

"This is where it used to be," she says, gazing into the park, into the past. "This was where we came to

the Stork Club. Everybody who was anybody, plus tourists and out-of-towners, but the *real* people, the ones who shared the secret, we knew our own. It was Sherman Billingsley's place and sometimes he'd throw a Balloon Night. He'd fill the room with balloons and stuff each one with a dollar bill, a ten, a twenty, a hundred, or maybe just a slip of paper with a prize for you to claim. My God, some of those starlets would body-check like hockey players just to get their claws on one! Walter Winchell was there, and Ethel Merman, and the whole *Who's Who* of Hollywood and Broadway and even Washington, D.C. When that terrible little man assassinated President Kennedy I cried because I kept remembering how I'd met him here, how young and sweet and handsome he was, how gracious, how funny, and now ... how lost."

She tries not to cry over that memory. She tells herself she's had centuries of practice at holding back tears. So many loves lost to her, so many friends, her own children, all gone. And the tears come anyway, because now she has to weep over the realization that she's no longer able to mourn for anyone but herself.

She brushes away the tears with bare knuckles, ruefully recalling vanished evenings when she'd sooner be caught dead than without gleaming satin gloves sheathing her arms from elbows to fingertips. "I always wore my finest gowns to go there, something by darling Oleg or Schiaparelli—my favorite was midnight blue silk, strapless, with a tulle overskirt scattered with tiny stars. All right, all right, they were rhinestones, but still.... "A sigh. "This is pretty—" She gestures at the little park. "—but it's not the same. Am I so wrong to miss the elegance? The chivalry? The way we took pains to be beautiful for each other? I had a white fox fur stole that lay against my cheek soft as summer clouds and when my date lit up my cigarette for me, no one glared at us as though we drowned kittens for a living."

Helen's escort stands behind her while she speaks and rests his hands on her shoulders. They're strong hands, and when they tighten their grip ever so slightly, so tenderly, she smells the vanished breeze from the Middle Sea and Paris's sunwarmed skin. When this beautiful boy murmurs, "I know what you mean," his sympathy is almost more than she can bear. Every fiber of her heart aches with something neither joy nor sorrow but the terrifying essence of both at once when he adds, "I understand. I do."

And by his lights, he does, because the next words out of his mouth are: "They won't let you smoke anywhere in this city anymore. It sucks."

He understands, he does, in exactly the same way that gaudy rhinestones on an old blue dress are boundless galaxies of stars. Helen steps out from under hands that are only a rental of companionship, pulling a phantom fox fur stole a little closer up around her face. "Let's go," she says, her words only a bit less sharp than shattered glass.

They go back to her apartment in a cab that reeks of raspberry air freshener. The driver's walled away from his passengers by a panel of grimy plastic and he's talking on his cell phone in a tongue whose ancestor is kin to the language Helen used when she scolded the slaves back at Troy. She doesn't really notice: She's elsewhere. The band leader at the Stork Club's just struck up "Embraceable You" and she's given herself up into the arms of a man she thinks she likes enough to marry, so she will. He doesn't know it yet, poor lamb, and he'll probably go to his grave believing their life together was all his idea. In her memories, Helen closes her eyes and fills her nostrils with the raspberry-free scent of bay rum and Wildroot Cream Oil, lets her face recall the feel of dancing cheek-to-cheek with a man who's had his beard cleanly scraped away by the hot-towel-bearing attentions of a professional barber. She's caught up in a dream of cufflinks and collar stays, dancing into the wee small hours with a stop at the Automat afterward for pie, or sunrise breakfast at Child's.

Back in her apartment, Helen loses her bet: Her escort makes no mention of candles, no move to turn off the lights. He pours her a drink and offers it with such gallant style that for an instant she believes he's

actually been paying attention.

So he has, but not to her words at all.

He's a competent lover, efficient where it counts, leisurely where it's an unavoidable necessity. Somewhere between their first kiss and her orgasm, Helen starts to see him through a flurry of masks like falling apple blossoms, his face wearing one by one the faces of every man who's ever shared her body. It's rather dizzying, so she slips into sleep on the crest of her climax as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

She wakes to find that he's gone. By an amazing coincidence, so is most of her jewelry. Helen's head reels as she sits up in bed, though it's less from the shock of discovering she's been robbed than from the after-effects of the drug he put in her drink, the lousy rent-a-romp bastard. She notes that her apartment has been rifled with thoroughness and care. This is no vulgar burglary, with the contents of her closets and drawers tossed everywhere, but an almost considerate invasion of her possessions: He's taken everything in her jewelry box and the pieces she wore tonight, but beyond that he's only rummaged through the top drawers of both nightstands and her bureau.

Well, that's a relief, in a way: It means she needn't get angry enough to kill him.

She could do it. She's a demi-goddess from a family that always did have anger-management issues. Her half-siblings, Artemis and Apollo, slaughtered Niobe's fourteen children merely because that foolish woman bragged about having whelped so many while their mother Leto only had two. *Sensible* divinities would have chalked up such *braggadocio* to the squirrely hormones of all those pregnancies. *Kindly* gods would have shot Niobe's husband. But that wasn't the Olympian way.

No wonder the Galilean took over so easily: He might have had a temper, but he was much better at keeping it in check. His only hands-on victim was a fig tree. His far more effective method of punishing offenders was to give them visions of hell.

Now there's a thought. Helen is old, but not too old to be past learning useful lessons, even when they come from her hereditary Foe.

She pads into her walk-in closet and reaches up into the shadows to pull a flimsy chain. Wavery light from a lone bulb, slightly loose in its socket, blooms over a pair of magnificent wings. Stored away with love and just a hint of mothballs, they hang encased in a clear plastic garment bag from B. Altman's. The plastic's yellowing and the zipper balks—that cherished old department store is now a library, offering books instead of ballgowns—but the wings retain the whiteness of Zeus's own thunderbolt.

Standing naked in the middle of her bedroom floor, at the heart of her first and greatest and only place of power, Helen sweeps them around her like a cape and lets them settle lightly onto her back as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a woman to wear the plumage of a swan. For her, it is. This is her birthright as Zeus's child, the wings he wore when in swan's shape he took Leda's love by storm. Now they're Helen's keepsake. Daddy always was one to give strange gifts. Just because you're the king of gods and men doesn't mean you know how to shop.

Helen sighs happily despite the pain she feels as the wings take root. The thousand hungry, thrumming fibers that pierce her flesh tell her that there's still enough power in the great pinions to serve her purpose. (A pity they're so impossibly uncomfortable for long hauls, or Miami winters wouldn't be beyond her reach. A shame she can never be Florida's first literal snowbird.) They'll carry her swiftly where she needs to go, but she'll feel each beat of the great wings as an echoing ache in her bones. Every power—myth or magic, legend or love—demands its sacrifice.

This one is worth it.

What's magic but the gift to transform reality? Helen's beauty is her magic, her immortality, fading but not yet gone. Now, with wings in place, she closes her eyes, spreads her arms wide enough to embrace the world that is already her unknowing slave, and invokes the full measure of her power. Gold flashes at her neck and wrists and waist and ankles. A diadem radiating glory equal to Apollo's own tries and fails to outshine the splendor of her hair. She's been alive long enough to know that it's not just what you can do, it's how good you look while doing it: Silver and gold, spangles and glitter, flags and fireworks. Appearances *do* count, often for everything. All women guard the same dark mystery, the source of life within them, but men and gods don't spill roses into the lap of the girl with the pilly sweater, the scruffy hair, the dull skin and the great personality. Go figure. Go learn the hard way.

Helen steps through a window that is suddenly a door and takes flight. The air above the island is cold, but she rejoices in it. Old's not dead, and every sensation that the waking world can throw her way is further proof that she's alive to relish it. She exults in the icy light of the Artemis-abandoned moon. The blend of blood and ichor in her veins is a crimson river holding far greater powers than silly parlor tricks like swan-winged flight. Even at this height it's no trouble at all to track him, to find him, to hunt him down. His scent is a beacon that broadcasts his presence until she pinpoints it, folds her wings, and drops back to earth with the swiftness and grace of a spear. In next to no time she's standing on the sidewalk outside the bar that reeks of his raw youth. There's only a door between them now.

Helen, is this wise?

She stops in her tracks, one hand extended to push the door open. Mortals are lucky: All they've got to deal with is an Inner Child. Helen's saddled with an Inner Athena. It wouldn't be so bad if it were the Voice of Reason, but like her haploid half-sister it's closer to being the Voice of I Know Better than You.

(It could be worse. It could be Athena in person, forever flaunting her knowledge, eternally arrogant in her virginity. How it must have rankled that dried-up bitter husk of a goddess to know that all her intellectual allurements couldn't bribe Paris into forking over the golden apple of Discord! Hera offered him dominion over the world, Athena tried tempting him with the gift of wisdom, but when Aphrodite promised him the high road to Helen's thigh-warded paradise, he tossed her the prize with one hand while dropping his loinwrap with the other.

The crowning irony of the whole Judgment of Paris situation was this: That the apple itself was earmarked *For the Fairest*. Not *For the Smartest* or *For the Most Likely to Succeed in World Conquest*, no. Even so, for all her high-hat egghead snobbery, her eternal touting of the value of brains over beauty, Athena *wanted* that damned apple. As brilliant as she was, as secure in her goddesshood, all she wanted was for someone to tell her that she was ... pretty.

As for Hera, she proved to be another sore loser. Helen still remembered asking Daddy's snooty wife about why she'd taken the Judgment so badly. Wasn't she still the queen of the gods? Didn't that count for more than possession of some gilt-dipped pippin? What need to bring destruction down on Troy and all the innocents behind its walls just because *one* Trojan prince let Little Paris do all his thinking for him?

Hera had looked down that perfect nose of hers at her husband's beautiful by-blow, sniffed haughtily, and said, "You wouldn't understand, child. It was the *principle* of the thing." And Athena, toadying at Hera's elbow, nodded agreement so vigorously that her helmet fell off.

Helen sighs. The *principle* of the thing is something to invoke when you need high-sounding excuses with which to bless a war you were going to fight anyway. She had enough of *that* patented hypocrisy three thousand years ago.

What she's about to do might not be wise, but it will be effective, straightforward, and sincere. The gods would never understand, but the gods are gone. She casts off Athena's unseen, overbearing presence and steps through the doorway into a watering-hole so vulgar and tawdry that its patrons take perverse pride in how blatantly it reeks of cheap beer, sour wine, and drinks the color of a smog-drenched L.A. sunset. If these people glitter at all, it's only when the lights hit a galaxy of steel studs on scores of ears and eyebrows and wagging tongues. It's a far, far cry from the Stork Club.

He's standing at the bar, still wearing his tux—she specified he was to wear a tux when she hired him—and he's completely ruining those trim, elegant lines of haberdashery by the amount of swag he's got crammed into the pants. Those are her diamonds in his pocket; he's *not* going to be happy to see her.

She passes through the crowd without incident. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but only when beauty consents to be seen. The other patrons of the club don't seem to notice that a winged woman all ashine with gold has come into their midst. He's the only one who sees her as she is, and as she comes nearer she's pleased to note how his first fear-drenched sight of her intensifies when he realizes nobody else sees anything frightening at all. He's isolated in his terror. She savors the instant when his expression turns to that of a man questioning his own sanity.

As Helen predicted, her faithless boytoy's got his chosen ladylove with him—a spiky-haired little dollop of mincemeat whose arm he grabs in a death-grip as he blurts out a string of spit-flecked questions: *Look there! Can't you see it? The naked woman? The wings? Are you blind?* The girl takes one gander at her crazed lover's wildly rolling eyes and lets out a shriek fit to put the harpies off their feed. Her pasty haunches shoot her out the door before Helen gets within arm's reach.

Helen grabs her escort's face with both hands and draws him toward her until she can smell the tequila on his breath and he can smell the blood on hers. She has the power to hold men helpless with her gaze. In Helen's eyes they see everything they ever loved reduced to a shadow dancing over windblown grass, here and gone, here and gone.

"It wasn't all that good," she tells him, and for an instant he forgets his panic, scowling at her mightily, the picture of indignation and wounded pride. Is *that* what he thinks she means, that she's come here solely to give him poor marks for his amorous skills? That's so stupid, it's almost cute. She makes matters clear: "The Stork Club. If you looked just under the surface, there were constant troubles with the unions and the mobs and the day-to-day ugliness that people used to think was simply the way things were, back then, the way things would and should always be. Josephine Baker sued because she claimed she was refused service. Oh, that's right, I'd have to *tell* you: She was black. Afro—African-American. At the Stork Club you could mix vichyssoise with *hung yan gai ding* for dinner and top it off with spumoni, but you'd better not dream of mixing with people who didn't ... belong." Her laugh is bitter enough to come from Athena's cold, un-kissed mouth. "You could order smoked sturgeon for three dollars, *foie gras* for five, and Beluga caviar for seven-fifty, but if you walked over to the table where J. Edgar Hoover was stuffing his face and told him what you thought of him there wouldn't be enough money in the world to save your hide."

Helen releases her hold. Her escort staggers back a step, but that's all. Her eyes command him, hold him captive. He gazes into them and learns that there are deaths in this world that the body survives, whether it wants to or no. "It wasn't all that good," she says again. "But it was the last place on Earth where I was still as beautiful as I'd ever been, the last place where people would remember me as I was. If it's gone, that's gone too."

She reaches over the bar and retrieves a golden goblet that was never there, *ta-daaaah!* Its amber liquor's heady with the scent of flowers. "Nectar," says Helen. "The drink of the gods themselves, their immortality. One sip, and today becomes forever." She drinks it down before he can beg for a taste, then

smiles at him. Her lips are still moist with eternal life, but her eyes brim with mortal sorrow.

"Little man, can you predict the day that brings your death?" she asks. "Do you know that it might be any day at all, including this one? Oh, I'm sure you never really *worry* about such things—you'd go crazy if you did, or worse, you'd get wrinkles. And how can you even begin to think about all the other deaths awaiting us? The death of grace, of glamour, of heedless joy, of youth and love and beauty, and finally the death that comes for the life that encompassed them all, the death even immortals fear, the death that sweeps away every sweet, familiar, comforting bit of the world you knew, but still leaves you behind.

"That last night at the Stork Club I had no idea at all I'd wake up the next day and see my first wrinkle, a tiny crease just between my eyebrows, a line not so deep as a well nor so wide as a blah-blah-blah, and yet...."

She shrugs as her voice trails off. The empty goblet vanishes from her hand as she reaches for his face again. He gasps and whimpers at her touch, trying to squirm away. Helen slaps him once, sharply, to silence him, because he sounds just like little Aggie, and the memory threatens to make her pity him.

Pity is the Galilean's turf; Helen's is beauty. Love knows compassion, but beauty neither pities nor forgives.

"Oh, grow up," she tells him. "And grow old."

Her lips are on his too suddenly for him to struggle or break free, the film of nectar sweet on his unwilling tongue. It seeps into his body, trickling through the dark red passageways until it finds a hospitable place in a disused corner of his mind. There it bubbles up as an eternal spring whose waters will fill his thoughts through the long, dark years to come with: *Is that a gray hair there, of all places?* and *Was that my kickass music on the "Easy Listening" station?* and *Someday everyone who remembers I was handsome will be gone*. And once those murmurs have been with him long enough so that he can almost ignore them, only then will the stream bring forth the hydra at its heart: *Why are those people looking at me like that, like I'm something they don't want to think about, something tainted, like I'm carrying some disease without a cure? Why are they looking at me like I've never been anything but old?*

Of course he assumes he's poisoned, and so he is, but not in any way he could ever imagine. He's got his cell phone beeping out the 911 overture so fast that he bumps the tip of Helen's perfect nose when he flips the unit open. She leaves him to it and turns away, picking a path between the puddles of nastiness on the club floor.

Outside once more, she shucks the swan's wings. Created in the blaze of a god's desire, their power subsides as Helen's passion for payback dwindles to embers of contentment with a job well done. Obliging a lady, they transform into a tasteful Aquascutum trenchcoat over something self-indulgent by Versace. The gold adornments decking her body re-accessorize themselves into Blahnik shoes and a Vuitton purse with enough cash inside for cabfare and a way-past-midnight snack.

Magic, like menopause, takes a lot out of a girl, and like having children, sometimes it seems to be more trouble than it's worth. She doesn't feel like going straight back home, just in case her Inner Athena's lurking there in ambush with a stern *Was that really necessary? Weren't you overreacting just a tad?*

Yes it was. No she wasn't, and she's sick and tired of people presuming that any time a woman past a certain age stands up for herself she must be *overreacting*. What counts as simple *reacting*, then? Lying down on the floor and writing thank-you notes for all the lovely footprints on her face?

Helen doesn't want to review what she's done. Having sat through all those years of Menelaus' postwar

post mortem (a.k.a. “And *then* I slew—) she's never had the desire to endure any more debriefings, even with herself, unless real briefs are involved. Anyway, she let the jerk keep the jewelry. Maybe he can hock it for some psychotherapy sessions. She'll ask him about it the next time she runs into him, say in a century or two. If he's really miserable perhaps she'll pity him enough to suggest that he get himself a dog.

She hails a taxi and directs the driver to take her to an all-night diner near her apartment building. Seating herself at the counter, she orders coffee, orange juice, scrambled eggs, a slab of dead pig, whole wheat toast, a bowl of oatmeal with cream and a crash-dump of brown sugar, and a cherry Danish. The man seated two stools over from her thumbs back the brim of his cap and surveys her meal with admiration that's as genuine as the butter soaking her toast.

"Not exactly on the Atkins, huh?" he says, grinning.

He's wearing much-laundered jeans and a blue polyester jacket with the name of a plumbing service embroidered on the back and ray in a white oval over the breast pocket. His mustache is as steely gray as what Helen can see of his hair. She's willing to wager that his cap's concealing a bald spot that's growing at about the same rate as his belly, but she also gets the feeling that he takes pains to choose shirts that are long enough to stay tucked in when he bends over on the job.

There's a younger man with him, a man with gleaming coal-black hair, a smooth face, a taut stomach, a tight butt, and the ability to take a woman to bed without asking her to be patient, just a minute, wait, sometimes it takes me a little while to get started. That young man would never dream of earning his living by reaming out other people's drains. In spite of this, that young man is also wearing that baseball cap, those jeans, that blue polyester jacket with the oval that says ray. He's seated on the same stool as the man who speaks to Helen, and he's smiling at her too.

Helen smiles back. “I'd offer you some,” she tells him. “But I'm going to eat it all, every bite.”

"That's good," he says. “That's what I like to see. Like I always say, a beautiful woman's got to keep her strength up. Uh, if you don't mind my saying so. That part about you being a beautiful woman, I mean.”

"It's a free country," Helen tells him. “And you're entitled to your opinion.” She laughs.

He's got clean plates in front of him, but he makes it a point to order a cherry Danish for himself and a refill on coffee, just so he has an excuse to linger on. When Helen tries to get her check from the waitress, he executes an interception worthy of a SuperBowl M.V.P.

"Look, I'm not trying to pull anything funny," he tells her. “It's just, well, how often do I get the chance to do something nice for a real lady these days?”

Helen rests one elbow on the counter, cups her chin in her hand, and gazes into a human face that like her own is young and old, fresh and faded. Paris stands at her back, tenderly passing ghostly fingers through her hair. The stories all claim he was a gloriously handsome young man, but facts are facts: He was abandoned in the mountains, raised on a farm, not in a palace. His face was chapped by wind and cold, his skin deeply scarred from cowpox, his nose broken and badly healed after a difference of opinion with the family bull, his hair sunbaked and brittle, his teeth chipped and stained where they weren't altogether missing, and he never *did* have any fashion sense. Would a handsome young man have believed he'd need *anyone's* help to get himself a beautiful woman, even Aphrodite's? Yet if the truth be told, Paris never did need the goddess to stack the deck for him with Helen. What she sees in Ray, she saw in him. She's surprised it's taken her this long to see it again. Live and live and live and learn.

The band is playing a rumba but—song cue be damned—Helen *does* hear a waltz. Her lips curve up as

the waiter slips a dish of caviar in front of her and bright, prize-filled balloons tumble from the ceiling.

"Darling—" Her breath stirs the soft cloud of fox fur at her throat as she reaches across the table for his hand. "Do you remember the Stork Club?"
